



HRM in the GCC

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Oxford
Strategic Consulting

Professor William Scott-Jackson
Oxford Strategic Consulting
Oxford, UK
wsj@oxfordstrategicconsulting.com

Human Resources Management in the Kingdom of Bahrain

Dr. Vijayalaxmi Moovala, Programme Manager, Centre for Leadership & Management, Bahrain Institute of Banking & Finance, Kingdom of Bahrain & Ms. Shaima Aqeel Janahi, HR Tutor, Bahrain Polytechnic, Kingdom of Bahrain

1. The importance of HRM for Bahrain and its national objectives

'The Kingdom of Bahrain is built on the belief that the Bahraini people are this country's greatest asset. Every step taken towards the overall development of this nation has that belief as a core element, and it is therefore safe to say that the future of this country depends on ensuring that we deliver the highest standards of education, training and the transfer of practical skills. Bahrain's Economic Vision 2030 recognises that education and training are both important elements in delivering the future of the country' (Al Mudhahki, 2009).¹

The economic vision of Bahrain

Bahrain is committed to use its resources to invest for the future, improving its human capital through education and training, particularly in the field of applied sciences. The Economic Vision 2030 is a document providing strategic direction for a period of over two decades ending 2030. It serves to fulfill this role and provides guidelines for Bahrain to become a global contender that can offer its citizens even better living

standards as a result of increased employment and higher wages in a safe and secure living environment.

Bahrain's economic growth is driven by increased productivity in the private sector and by Bahrainis becoming the employee of choice for high-value-adding companies. Economic growth in Bahrain will create the foundation for continuously increasing employment opportunities. The growing economy will create new jobs to employ Bahrainis entering the job market, while those Bahrainis already in the workforce will be able to move to better-qualified jobs and raise their income. This will nurture an expanding middle class with an improved quality of life.

The Government of Bahrain ensures that economic growth benefits all Bahrainis fairly by:

- Ensuring that economic growth creates medium- to high-wage jobs and raises incomes in all segments of society.
- Creating a level playing field in the job market for Bahrainis through immigration reform and the revision of labour laws.

- Helping Bahrainis attain medium- to high-wage jobs through support programmes and lifelong training.²

The role of education

His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa during the Bahrain First festival [Bahrain Awalan] in December 2010 stated that: 'Education comes first and foremost to enhance our endeavours to achieve more prosperity and progress in our blessed country. Beloved students, you are the pillars, hope and backbone of the future, upon which the nation depends for generations to come.'³

Education empowers people to reach their full potential in business, government and society. It will shape and develop the successive generations and will provide Bahrainis with the skills, knowledge and values that they need to become the employees of choice for high-valued added positions. Because education is essential for making this Vision a reality, Bahrain is focusing to develop an education system that provides every citizen with educational opportunities appropriate to their individual needs, aspirations and abilities.

¹ Dr. Jawaher Shaheen Al Mudhahki, Chief Executive, National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education & Training, Kingdom of Bahrain <http://en.qaa.bh/ViewPage.aspx?PagelId=9> [accessed 02 April 2013]

² 'The Economic vision 2030 for Bahrain' - Strategic document released by Government of Bahrain

³ <http://en.qaa.bh/UsersFiles/FckFiles/file/UsersFiles/eng%20annual%20report/Engl%20Final%20Final.pdf> [accessed 24 April 2013]

Education and training need to be relevant to the requirements of Bahrain and its economy, delivered to the highest possible quality standards, and accessible based on ability and merit.⁴

2. Overview of current initiatives in Bahrain

National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education & Training

As part of the wider 'Education Reforms' project, the 'Quality Assurance Authority for Education & Training' was established in 2008. Its mandate is to 'review the quality of the performance of education and training institutions in light of the guiding indicators developed by the Authority'. The Authority is also required to publish Review Reports as well as to report annually on the status of education within the Kingdom; this includes findings as well as improvements that have occurred as a result of the work of the Authority. In December 2012, it was re-organized as the 'National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education & Training', to reflect the new mandate and scope of work entrusted to the Authority. A new unit, the National Qualifications Framework Unit, was formed to complement the activities of the Authority's other units that are responsible for reviewing the quality of the performance of

education and training institutions, and for conducting the National Examinations.⁵

Tamkeen

An organization named Labour Fund was established in August 2006 [now called Tamkeen] as part of Bahrain's national reform initiatives and Bahrain Economic Vision 2030. It is tasked with supporting Bahrain's private sector and positioning it as the key driver of economic development. Tamkeen's two primary objectives are: 1) Fostering the creation and development of enterprises, and 2) Providing support to enhance the productivity and growth of enterprises and individuals. Under each of those objectives, a number of mechanisms and programmes have been identified based on detailed studies of the labour market to identify current and future gaps for individuals and enterprises and how to address them.⁶

As of December 2011, Tamkeen injected more than BD 166 million into the private sector through its programmes, targeting and benefiting more than 100,000 Bahrainis and enterprises. Moreover, it has made in excess of BD 166 million available through its enterprise financing portfolio, and enabled over 3,000 Bahrainis find employment, and more than 1,000 enterprises to participate in leading local, regional, and international trade fairs and exhibitions.

In 2012 Tamkeen launched more

than 20 new initiatives. These programmes range from training to develop human capital - whether students, employees, employers, or job seekers - to match acquired skills to market requirements, and other programmes which enhance the productivity of individuals through promoting awareness of successful practices in the private sector. For enterprises, Tamkeen provides professional consulting services to raise their performance, and facilitates access to financing to bridge the enterprise financing gap. In addition, Tamkeen is also supporting and contributing to other national initiatives which enhance investments in Bahrain, create opportunities for Bahraini individuals and enterprises in Bahrain to develop.⁷

Tamkeen Special Project related activities involve tactical strategic initiatives designed to support the objectives of Tamkeen and the economic growth of the Kingdom of Bahrain in support of the 2030 vision. These projects aim to enhance the growth, development and productivity of private enterprise, supporting Bahrainis to be employees of choice, and generating new opportunities for employment and wage growth. Current special projects being explored by Tamkeen in support of its objectives and mandate are:

Productivity Movement

The Productivity Movement initiative seeks to support and enhance national competitiveness in the economy by raising

⁴ <http://en.qaa.bh/ViewPage.aspx?Pageld=9> [accessed 04 April 2013]

⁵ <http://en.qaa.bh/AnnualReportEn2012.pdf> [accessed 04 April 2013]

⁶ <http://www.tamkeen.bh/en/> [accessed 02 April 2013]

⁷ <http://www.tamkeen.bh/en/about/?p=Profile> [accessed 02 April 2013]

awareness and fueling productivity maximizing practices within the private sector and Bahraini workforce as means to realizing greater opportunities for Bahrainis. In doing so, improved productivity among businesses and the labour force will reinforce and boost the inherent value and efficiency of overall activity in the national economy. As a movement, Tamkeen will seek to support the development of a framework for productivity enhancement. However, as an economic objective, a tri-party approach to an effective productivity movement including Government, Business, and Labour will be required to ensure that widespread practices and knowledge relating to productivity is absorbed within most segments of the economy and society.

The Productivity Movement will spread knowledge and awareness of the potential benefits of productivity in the workplace and business environment along with the support of Government to help support the acceleration of economic activity and fuel job creation and business development as well as re-investment to support improved standards, work volume, profitability as well as quality and overall competitiveness both locally and internationally.⁸

Human capital development

Human capital development initiatives and projects at Tamkeen have been designed to address challenges in the labour market and to put forward solutions to improve the employability and career

progression of the Bahraini citizen in the private sector with a vision to transform Bahraini citizens into employees of choice.

Labour market challenges related to the human element are:

- The economic and social costs of high unemployment
- Expatriate employees are cheaper, more productive and flexible
- Bahrainis are unable to compete with expatriates due to lack of experience and inadequate training
- Dissatisfaction with wage levels and working conditions leading to high labour turnover
- The employers' inability to provide Bahrainis with career path development opportunities
- The failure of training to respond to market needs

The focus of the Human Capital Development Division is to achieve the following strategic objectives:

1. Increase Bahrainisation in sectors dominated by expatriates
2. Increase wages of existing Bahraini employees
3. Advance labour market systems

In addition to investing resources and efforts into the development of labour market systems infrastructure, Tamkeen's Human Capital Development projects target mainly students, new entrants into the labour market, employees as well as employers.⁹

Talent management programme

The programme's main objective is to provide support to business owners and existing employees in leadership and HR roles of enterprises by enhancing their competencies in the areas of HR and Leadership. This programme targets 1,600 candidates for the workshops, and 800 for the certification both in Arabic and in English. Tamkeen will cover the full cost of the workshops/ certification. Also, employees will be trained on different aspects such as enterprise management, strategic planning, leadership, marketing management, HR management, performance management, training and development, recruitment, salaries and benefits, Bahrain labour law, and quality systems for HR management.¹⁰

Career progression programme

The Career progression programme, initially launched in 2007, has benefited 12,000 beneficiaries with over BD 18 million so far. The programme was launched in line with Tamkeen's initiative to enhance the capabilities of Bahrainis to make them employees of choice in the private sector. The programme helps employers address skills gaps of their Bahraini employees by providing them with a set of training opportunities to gain the necessary skills and boost their wages. Depending on the track selected, the programme will give beneficiaries professional training that will enable them to receive

⁸ <http://www.tamkeen.bh/en/pnd/?p=SpecialProjects> [accessed 02 April 2013]

⁹ <http://www.tamkeen.bh/en/pss/?p=HCD> [accessed 02 April 2013]

¹⁰ <http://www.tamkeen.bh/en/hcd/?p=TalentManagement> [accessed 02 April 2013]

a minimum wage increase of BD. 50 to their basic salary. The wage increase is subsidised by Tamkeen for a maximum of 2 years.

Tamkeen's Acting Vice President, Human Capital Development, Amal Al-Kooheji, commented on the announcement: 'Since its inception, the Career Progression Programme has provided a stepping stone for thousands of employees to develop in their professions and enhance their careers. The decision to put it under our direct management is part of a larger Tamkeen strategy that will put us in a better position to further improve our services as we prepare to develop and expand our programmes in the near future. To date, more than 75,000 Bahrainis and enterprises have benefited from Tamkeen's programmes, with more than 100,000 beneficiaries set to benefit from these programmes in all.'¹¹

a9eel

a9eel¹² is a nationwide work ethics campaign of the people and for the people of Bahrain, to develop the right approach to work. It is a movement for change towards positive work attitudes and to build a generation of men and women of character who are led by integrity and conviction. The campaign was conceived in the light of a recent survey to assess the level of employees from the perspective of domestic Bahraini companies. This study revealed the need to strengthen work ethics among employees. Issues such as punctuality, proper use

of company resources, honesty, sincerity, co-operation with other employees, showing initiative towards professional growth and having a realistic opinion about one's capabilities were found to be some of the areas among many others that needed to be improved. The objectives of this campaign therefore are to raise awareness about the issue of work attitudes in Bahrain, especially amongst organisations and Bahraini employees.¹³

3. Interviews/focus group findings

For the purposes of this section on Bahrain, opinions of HR professionals was elicited regarding the important dimensions related HRM in Bahrain. Structured interviews were conducted with 6 HR professionals during March and April 2013. Focus group interviews were conducted with 35 HR practitioners during March 2013. These practitioners were drawn from different industries in Bahrain. The responses of these participants threw light on major areas like HR enablers, role of HR practitioners, challenges in HRM, HR needs/priorities and current state of HRM in Bahrain. The findings are summarized in the following section.

HRM enablers

The general belief that emerged was that HR needs the support of the Board of Directors and CEOs.

For HR practitioners to play their role effectively, the major enabler was top management involvement and a right environment. It was emphasized that HR should be involved in all board and executive meetings, where they contribute in discussing HR related topics in these meetings. The main HR enablers highlighted by the participants were integrity, teamwork and internal customer orientation at all levels. According to the participants these factors would enable them to achieve the organizational strategic objectives. Other strategic roles of HR, as stated by some participants, was espousing ethics within the organization, facilitation between management and the staff, operating as change agents as well as business partners. It was agreed that the HR function is embedded into the business, not isolated from the business strategy and decision making.

Role of HR practitioners

The role of HR managers was perceived as internal consultants whose clients are the line managers. Line managers should in turn work as ambassadors of HR in their departments. It was agreed by the participants that the main role of HR practitioners is in ensuring the quality of performance of staff up to the required standard in order to achieve the strategic objectives of the organisation. The HR policies were described as a supporting factor and not something rigid. Some organizations do have room for flexibility and deal on a case by case basis. The general opinion was

¹¹ <http://www.tamkeen.bh/en/?p=details&id=880> [accessed 02 April 2013]

¹² In the Arab culture, the word "a9eel" signifies a worth that can only be compared to strong roots and pure gold. It conveys a high level of class in terms of culture and character. Bahrainis are "a9eels" due to their highly cultured and refined temperament.

¹³ <http://www.tamkeen.bh/en/hcd/?p=WorkEthics> [accessed 02 April 2013]

that HR practitioners should take a lead in creating a comfortable work environment, having open communication channels, and frequent interaction amongst the management and employee groups.

Challenges in HRM

The challenges (people barriers) obstructing the achievement of objectives, as discussed by the participants, are work ethics and employee perceptions. Organisations have groups of employees who don't have the sense of responsibility. They give less and expect more. Underachievers are not very receptive to performance feedback. Other people barriers are absenteeism, having non-qualified staff especially in recruitment team where they lack the competency to hire the right people for the right job. Resistance to change, losing focus at work, pressure on available resources by the management, as they tend to reduce cost and avoid hiring more people, therefore allocating more tasks to the existing employees.

HR knowledge/skills/ attributes

The skills/ attributes which HR practitioners should have, as listed by the participants are: flexibility, being open-minded, to have the ability to understand and to become a role model. The HR team should have a basic knowledge of the business, performance management and culture. HR practitioners should be empowered and ought to have strong knowledge in labour law. Some described the best HR practitioner is one who has a good understanding

of the business of the organization, knows what's going on and makes decisions based on expertise. Meeting deadlines, honouring commitments good listening and problem solving skills are other qualities that HR practitioners must have. HR people should be good team players and be updated in latest HR trends.

4. Role and contribution of HRM practitioners in Bahrain

HRM practitioners in Bahrain have a crucial role to play in achieving the individual, organisational and national objectives. On an individual level, they have to focus on the training and development of Bahrainis, and help in their career growth. Managers need to be good coaches to Bahrainis. By having HR systems in place, and by ensuring the right implementation of these systems, they can increase the motivation level of Bahrainis. Through a planned career progression of Bahrainis, the Bahrainisation level in organisations would increase, thereby contributing to one of the national goals. This would be in line with the Human Capital Development initiative undertaken by Tamkeen.

HRM practitioners main role in Bahrain is to educate the employee groups with regard to productivity, performance linked rewards, work ethics, scientific HR mechanisms. a9eel campaign is an initiative by the government of Bahrain to address this issue on a nationwide scale. The special project Productivity Movement, is also contributing towards this

end. Mature and well-informed employee groups would contribute in the progress of professional HR practice. For corporate Bahrain to move into HR professionalism, HR managers need to be role models and adhere to the ethics. They have to play an advisory role to the top management keeping in view the employee welfare and organisational goals. The Talent Management programme of Tamkeen is aimed at management development in Bahraini organisations.

5. Specific HR priorities/ needs in Bahrain

In general, the HR practice in Bahrain has improved during the last two decades. In the recent past, organisations in Bahrain have recruited professionally qualified HR personnel and/or sponsored their professional HR qualifications. There has been improvement in the HR practice in organisations, though not at the pace it should have been. Organisations in Bahrain need to strengthen their HR mechanisms. Many organisations do not have well established HR systems, especially compensation and performance management system. Well educated and trained HR professionals need to be more persuasive and influence top management to have scientific HR mechanisms in their organisations.

Bahraini employees are highly educated, well aware of their rights and are career oriented. Keeping in line with the employment expectations of these employees, Bahrain Labour Law

pertaining to employee rights and responsibilities should be upheld and implemented fairly. The slant of HR in Bahrain should be towards implementing HR systems fairly and objectively. The need of the day for HRM to progress at the desired pace in Bahrain is to have top management and HR professionals in organisations working ethically and in a non-discriminatory manner.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

It can be concluded that the

Government of Bahrain is spearheading the human capital development in the country. The Economic Vision 2030 for Bahrain is a step in the right direction towards human capital development, economic growth, and overall socio-cultural improvement in Bahrain. It encompasses all facets of life in Bahrain. Injecting Government funds into the training and development of Bahrainis through Tamkeen sponsored programmes like the Productivity Movement, Talent Management, a9eel campaign is a significant contribution to the cause of human capital development. Supporting

the salary increase of private sector employees through the Career Progression Programme is yet another major indicator of the government's commitment to the people of Bahrain.

At the organisational level, it is recommended that HR managers need to be empowered to function in a professional manner. Organisations need to continue with the training of HR practitioners in HR professional qualifications as there is a need for more qualified HR professionals in small and medium enterprises in Bahrain. Organisations on Bahrain should