

Can learning organisation and affective commitment contribute towards employee retention: The case of engineering organisations in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries?

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Abstract

This working paper presents the key parameters of an exploratory study on the role of learning organisation (LO) and affective commitment (AC) towards employee retentions amongst engineering companies in Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCCC). It seeks to address current knowledge gap and evaluate the applicability of the LO model across national boundaries with an emphasis of the role of culture as an influencing factor to determine perception around LO within GCC context, as well as to assess how LO and AC might impact the employees' retention. A pragmatic (positivistic/realistic) epistemology has been adopted to design the data collection approach through two stages: first stage will be verifying the key dimensions of LO within engineering organisations through in-depth interviews with employees. This is given the nature of the study at the first stage to be inductive to identify those key dimensions. Second stage will be testing key hypothesis through a multi-level survey. The study has developed a framework by considering the Fifth Discipline of Peter Senge (1992) and Pedler (1997) and Marsick and Watkins' Dimensions of Learning Organisation (DLOQ) instruments to achieve the study objectives. The framework has taken into consideration the individual, group and organisational levels of LO. The study will provide useful insights to inform policy makers, organisations and Human Resource professionals' future thinking on managing individual talents in the region.

Key words: Learning organisation, organisational commitment, retention, GCCC, engineering industry.

Introduction to key issues

The research aims to explore the effect of LO and AC towards the level of employee retention within the engineering organisations. Due to the recent changes in the economy and funding budgets strategies in the GCC countries (Kuwait Times, 2015), engineering organisations have been forced to reduce labour costs and to re-evaluate their practices on employee retention and rewards. Historically, organisations have been utilising the financial rewards to motivate the employees to overcome the work environment challenges (Naithani and Jha, 2009). Nevertheless, the rhetoric that employee retention can be enhanced through financial rewards and extrinsic motivation seems less effective in turbulent times. Establishing an effective learning organisation might provide the capacity to respond to radical business environment conditions and changes (Davis and Daley, 2008). Schwandt and Marquardt

(2000) argued that only learning organisations will be able to survive in the long-term and to quickly respond to today's challenges. However, LO is not the sole factor for organisational survival as an appropriate cultural (visions, values, assumptions and behaviours) and structure (communication, leadership) facets are required to establish a supportive learning environment (Jamali, Sidani and Zouein, 2009). It is the result of employees' learning and knowledge sharing behaviour and a learning tool to address organisational problems (Stinson, Pearson and Lucas, 2006).

Several studies have investigated the correlation between LO dimensions, employee retention and organisational commitment (Abu Khadra and Rawabdeh, 2006; Dirani, 2009; Jamali, Sidani and Zouein, 2009). For example, Joo and Lim (2009) hypothetical model investigated the correlation between organisational learning as a dimension/factor of LO, job complexity and the moderate impact of proactive personality and organisational commitment. They found that participants have been psychologically more attached to organisations that provide continuous and team learning opportunities. Other authors have found that there is a positive impact of training and development as part of LO approach due to the value of learning in achieving professional goals (Shafiq, Zia-ur-Rehman and Rashid, 2013), 2013). In terms of employee engagement, studies show that there is a strong correlation between organisational commitment and more particularly AC and employees' retention (Shanker, 2013).

Despite that LO has gained an intensive attention in the recent years (Senge, 1990; Cors, 2003; Jamali, Sidani and Zouein, 2009), there still a gap to address the applicability of the model across national boundaries (Retna and Jones, 2013) including the GCCC. Some studies have investigated the business environment and challenges encountering expatriate workers within the GCCC including leadership style and knowledge and skills perceptions (Naithani and Jha, 2009; Al-Malki, Scott-jackson and Campbell, 2014; Corby, 2014). There is an absence of research to understand how to improve the employee retention through the concept of LO especially for engineering organisations in GCCC. As Retna and Jones (2013) qualitative research revealed there is a perceptual error around LO dimensions and the national culture. Current literature heavily relies on western context to studying LO as they perceive the concept as visionary ideals resulted from a combination of factors including personal mastery, learning behaviour, empowering, and team learning (Shipton, Zhou and Mooi, 2013). However, the literature is skinny in studying the impact of different cultures may have on the relationship between LO dimensions, AC and employee retention. Without considering the impact of the different cultures and develop a more comprehensive framework, transferability of knowledge might be unsuitable for GCCC engineering organisations, especially with the current economic environment (Doha News, 2016).

Reflecting from current literature, the study is expected to achieve two main goals. First, the study aims to explore the role of culture as an influencing factor to determine perception around LO within GCCC context. It seeks to

evaluate how organisational practices can be improved in establishing effective learning environment and most importantly how those organisations interpret, establish and implement LO context. Secondly the study seeks to explore the extent to which there is a correlation between the LO dimensions and the AC as well as to assess how LO and AC might impact the employees' retention in engineering organisations. Such knowledge is critical for key stakeholders including management, policy makers and organisations who wish to enter/expand the GCCC markets as well as to manage effectively key talents.

GCC countries and the need for learning

Since the financial crisis in 2008, the global business environment encounters great challenges and radical changes, which had an impact on the economy and funding strategies of many countries. The GCCC, like the rest of the world, have been impacted. The civil wars after what known as the "Arab Spring" has resulted in a great level of uncertainty and instability of the economy in those countries. Additionally, the environmental changes had a negative impact on the oil and gas prices in the global markets (Kuwait Times, 2015). The reduction of the oil and gas prices, as the most influencer source of income for the GCC countries, had an impact on the funding budget strategies and organisation operating models in the region (Hvidt, 2013; EIU, 2014).

Currently, the construction industry worth around US\$ 1.3 Trillion including long-term megaprojects (Corby, 2014), which require highly qualified, talented and diversified resources. Despite the significant of the industry to the national economy, organisations are heavily depending on expatriate workers due to the lack of qualified national resources (Naithani and Jha, 2009). The work environment in the GCCC is neither convenient nor prepared for the expatriate workers (Hvidt, 2013). They are encountering several social and cultural challenges including local regulations, weak labour laws, labour market liberalisation, inflation of cost of living, and culture. Most expatriate workers experience a "culture shock" due to the language barriers, national culture and traditions (Al-Malki, Scott-jackson and Campbell, 2014).

To retain employees, most organisations have paid more emphasis on financial rewards to overcome the work environment challenges (Naithani and Jha, 2009). Nevertheless, the rhetoric that employee retention can be enhanced through financial rewards and extrinsic motivation seems less effective in turbulence times (Sahi, G.; Mahajan, 2014). In the new regional economy, the costs have become a central issue for public and private sectors. Therefore, engineering organisations have been forced to reduce labour costs and re-evaluate their practices on employee retention and rewards. Establishing an effective LO seems as an alternative approach to respond to radical business environment conditions and changes (Davis and Daley, 2008). As Schwandt and Marquardt (2000) argued, only effective LO strategies will enable organisations to survive in the long-term and to quickly respond to today's challenges. It is the result of employees' learning and knowledge sharing behaviour (Wang and Ahmed, 2003) and a learning tool to address

organisational problems (Stinson, Pearson and Lucas, 2006). This provides a platform to undertake an extensive research into the area of LO in the region.

Understanding the term Learning Organisation

In recent years, there is a growing body of literature that recognises the importance of LO concept in the West and Far East (Cors, 2003; Xiaojun and Mingfei, 2008; Jamali, Sidani and Zouein, 2009; Retna and Jones, 2013). The concept was first evolved by Peter Senge's (1987) publication on his book the Fifth Disciplines. Senge (1994:13) has defined LO as a place 'where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it'. It is a process whether organisations aim to expand individual capacities to achieve the desired result (mental models), learn how to communicate and share knowledge with each other (Personal Mastery), understanding the process and procedures of the organisation (systems thinking), understanding the common goals and objectives (shared vision), and then work with the team to achieve those goals and objectives (team learning). However, the concept has found difficulty to be understood (Jamali, Sidani and Zouein, 2009). This ambiguity encouraged researchers to investigate the concept and to try to come up with another definition of LO (Cors, 2003; Örtenblad, 2004).

On the other hand, Argyris (1994) focuses more on individual as a learning agent to the organisation by responding to external and internal changes. He refers to the process of identifying the problem as "Single-Loop learning", then to challenge the problem, identify and implement a solution as "Double-Loop learning". Once the learning is shared within the group and organisation, it becomes continuous learning and organisational learning (Moilanen, 2001; Cors, 2003). This is in line with Schon (1996) work that focuses on organisational learning at individual level. He sees the employee as a learning agent to the organisation (Moilanen, 2001; Cors, 2003). Schon together with Argyris stated that 'an organization's learning system is made up of the structures that channel organizational inquiry and the behavioural world of the organization, draped over these structures, that facilitates or inhibits organizational inquiry' (1996:28).

Additionally, Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1997:3) sees LO as "... *an organisation that facilitates learning to all its members and consciously transforms itself and its context*". He argued that LO is more than a single process and independent factors, it is however a combination of process, decisions making, tasks, structure, and employees (Moilanen, 2001). The additional interesting value of Pedler's research is that they have developed a tool to measure the LO. Pedler's tool comprises 11 dimensions, that emphasis the role of the employee in the organisation as a whole and not in leading the learning process (Jamali, Sidani and Zouein, 2009). Key insights from the review of the LO concept show that there is an ambiguity around the concept accompanied with varies definitions and models (Cors, 2003; Örtenblad, 2004; Jamali, Sidani and Zouein, 2009). For the purpose of the research, LO is defined as "... *one that has embedded the capacity to adapt or to respond*

quickly and in novel while working to remove barriers to learning” (Marsick and Watkins, 2003:136). Table 1 shows key definition of LO in the literature.

| Author | Definitions |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Garvin (1993:80) | An organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights. |
| Marsick and Watkins (2003:136) | A learning organisation is one that has embedded the capacity to adapt or to respond quickly and in novel while working to remove barriers to learning. |
| Örtenblad (2004:132) | Learning organisation is an organisation where the four aspects: Organizational Learning, Learning at work, Developing a learning climate and creating Learning structure exist/present. |

Table 1: Varies Definitions of Learning Organisation

In the 1990s, Watkins and Marsick have developed a Learning Organisation model to measure the Organisational Learning Culture. This model was illustrated in practice through the Dimensions of the Learning Organisation Questionnaires (DLOQ) (Marsick, 2013). The DLOQ model identifies seven dimensions that enhance the organisation’s capability to learn and to transfer itself. The DLOQ is also an instrument to measure any changes in the organisational learning practice and culture (Marsick, 2013), and to measure each of the dimensions at different levels. These levels include individual, group and organisational. The model was scientifically and empirically tested (Dirani, 2009). The DOLQ model was used as the bases of several empirical studies like for example Jamali, Sidani and Zouein (2009). These key dimensions are considered as the foundation of this research. Table 2 shows the definitions of those key dimensions:

| Level | Dimension | Definition |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Individual | Create continuous learning opportunities | Learning is designed into work so that people can learn on the job; opportunities are provided for ongoing education and growth. |
| | Promote inquiry and dialogue | People gain productive reasoning skills to express their views and the capacity to listen and inquire into the views of others; the culture is changed to support questioning, feedback, and experimentation. |
| Team/Group | Encourage collaboration and team learning | Work is designed to use groups to access different modes of thinking; groups are expected to learn together and work together; collaboration is valued by the culture and rewarded. |
| | Create systems to capture and share learning | Both high and low technology systems to share learning are created and integrated with work; access is provided; systems are maintained. |
| Organisation | Empower people toward a collective vision | People are involved in setting, owning, and implementing a joint vision; responsibility is distributed close to decision making so that people are motivated to learn toward what they are held accountable to do. |
| | Connect the organisation to its environment | People are helped to see the effect of their work on the entire enterprise; people scan the environment and use information to adjust work practices; the organization is linked to its communities. |
| | Provide strategic leadership for learning | Leaders model, champion, and support learning; leadership uses learning strategically for business results. |

Table 2: Definitions of the Seven Dimensions of the Learning Organisation
(Source: adapted from Watkins and Marsick, 2003)

Assessing organisational commitment, learning and culture

Organisational commitment is a major LO indicator. Abu Khadra and Rawabdeh (2006) and Dirani (2009) found that there is a strong positive correlation between the dimensions of LO at different levels and organisational commitment, more particularly AC. In particular, Joo and Lim (2009) see OC as a psychological bond between the employee and the organisation. Joo and Lim (2009) argued that employees are more productive when they are intrinsically motivated and not only by rewards. Intrinsic motivation covers the personal and contextual characterises. They based their assumption that motivational orientation is partially affected by the work environment, but at the same time it is stable. It can be argued that this assumption is not valid in all cases including the GCCC, where cultural factor plays a key role in shaping the business and work environment. The findings indicate that employees are psychologically more attached to the organisation that provides continuous and team learnings. Their findings show 0.95 as median reliability compared to 0.85 in other similar studies (Allen and Meyer, 1996 cited in Joo and Lim, 2009). However, the study did not take into consideration the cultural factor which may have alternate the findings and affect the employees' affective organisational commitment.

Further to that, Retna and Jones (2013) qualitative interpretive study have explored the LO dimensions within the Singaporean context. The findings have shown that there is a kind of tension of the perception of the LO dimensions and the national culture. For example, involvement of the employees in the decision making was wrongly perceived by senior managers due to the fear of making mistakes. It can be argued that this emerged from the culture of superiority. Although, the study addresses a very important view point, which is the influence of the national culture in Singapore on LO practices, the findings are limited to two public organisations. Public organisations have a different nature and operation models than for example the private or multinational organisations.

Shipton, Zhou and Mooi (2013) have also investigated whether there is a global model of Learning Organisation that can be applied across countries. They have used a sample of 6,000 companies from 15 different countries including the United Kingdom, China and Brazil. The findings show that there is significant correlation between LO and development orientation, innovation, sustained competitive advantage and financial performance. However, the study is limited as to how culture influence on the applicability of the model. They argued that the different cultures may be a valid reason of why the western-model of LO is not achieving the targeted outcomes in other regions. This is in line with the finding of the previously given example of Retna and Jones (2013) who argued that there is a need for further studies in other non-western countries taking into consideration the national cultural context.

Shafiq, Zia-ur-Rehman and Rashid (2013) went a step further and explored the relation or impact of training and development on organisational commitment. They found that there is a positive impact of training and

development as part of LO approach on the all types of organisational commitment. The correlation coefficient shows that the training and development is directly correlated to OC ($r=+0.64$). While the findings show that the impact of the compensation scored less than the training and development with correlation coefficient of $+0.597$. It seems that employees see training and development as an investment to enhance career progress and potential promotions.

This study argues that the implementation of the LO approach through the verified key dimensions will make the employees feel that there are added values other than the financial rewards, which by turn will motivate to share the same values and goals of the organisation and to be emotionally linked to it. The result of that will be more motivation for the employees to stay with the organisation. Therefore, it is argued that the key dimensions of LO have a direct effect upon individuals AC. Hence, H1 is developed as follows:

H1: Key dimensions of learning organisation are positively related to affective commitment within engineering organisations in the GCC.

The role of employee retention

Retaining talented and skilled employees within the global challenging business environment is a great challenge for organisations. Organisations always work on retaining their most valuable asset the employees adopting strategies to increase employee motivation and engagement (Buck *et al.*, 2002). However, GCCC are now facing a number of key socio-economic challenges (Hvidt, 2013) including retaining employees. Studies have indicated that organisational commitment is positively impact the employees' intention to stay within the organisation (Buck *et al.*, 2002; ALDamoe, Sharif and Hamid, 2013; Shanker, 2013; Sahi, G.; Mahajan, 2014). According to Shanker (2013), organisations are willing to retain their employees by increasing their level of loyalty and commitment. Moreover, the findings of Shanker's study indicate that there is a positive correlation between AC and employees' intention to stay ($\beta=0.68$). Similarly, ALDamoe, Sharif and Hamid (2013) argue that employee's intention to stay with an organisation increases when they are emotionally linked to the organisation's strategies, visions and goals. With the current new funding strategies in GCC countries, organisation need to retain their skilled employees by increasing their commitment to maintain their competitive advantage (Hvidt, 2013). Therefore, the study predicts that increased employees' AC will motivate them to be loyal and stay within the organisation.

For this study, employee retention is served as independent variable. Precedent studies have used different scales to measure the employees' intention to stay. Sahi and Mahajan (2014) have added two items in their survey to assess the employees' intention to stay in the future 12 months. While, Shanker (2013) has added single item to measure the retention from 0-6 months to 7 years. Therefore, the study will be following the same approach by adding couple of new items to measure the employee retention. Based on the above, H2 is developed as follows:

H2: Affective commitment is positively related to employees' retention within engineering organisations in the GCC.

On the other hand, the key dimensions of the LO is expected to increase employees' willingness to stay with the organisation. LO dimensions includes a shared vision and goals as well as appropriate policies to empower individuals. If the organisation succeeded to align these goals and values with the employees', the employees will become more loyal and will stay with the organisation. This is in line with Dirani (2009) findings, which indicate that the implementation of the LO dimensions motivates employees to stay with the organisation. With the proposition that the situation is similar in the GCC, employees who will be considering the key dimensions of LO as benefits to their professional development, will be more loyal and stay with the organisation. In the model, the key dimensions of LO will be served as independent variables based on the DLOQ developed by Marsick and Watkins. While, the Employees Retention will be served as dependent variable. To investigate further, H3 is developed as follows:

H3: Key dimensions of Learning Organisation are positively related to Employees Retention within Engineering Organisations in the GCC.

For example, Allen, Bryant and Vardaman (2010), OC is one of the stronger indicators of employees' retention. Moreover, the findings of other researches have founds that there is a strong correlation between OC and more particularly the AC and employees' retention (AlDamoe, Sharif and Hamid, 2013; Shanker, 2013). Further to that, Shanker (2013) argued that OC is multidimensional construct which includes loyalty, sharing same goals and values. The aim of this study is to identify dimensions of OC and their relationships with employees' retention. He used Porter et al. (1974) instrument to measure the OC. The findings of the study show that there a strong positive correlation between AC and employee willing to stay within the organisation. The findings also show that the AC has the strongest positive correlation among the other types of organisational commitment including continuance and attitudinal commitments. This strengthen the view that the AC is more suitable for this study.

Research Methodology

The study has adopted a pragmatic (positivistic/realistic) epistemology by adopting a variety of research methodological approaches at different stages. The study has developed a framework (see Figure 1) by considering the Fifth Discipline of Peter Senge (1992) and Pedler (1997) and Marsick and Watkins' Dimensions of Learning Organisation (DLOQ) instruments to achieve the research objectives through two stages: The first stage of the research will be verifying the key dimensions of LO associated with the work environment within engineering organisations in the GCC. The verification will take into consideration the influence of the GCC national culture. At this stage, the study tends to be qualitative to identify those key dimensions of LO. Moving to the second stage, the verified key dimensions will form the LO framework

for testing the relationships with AC and employee retention. Figure 1 presents the key aspects of the study and the hypothesis model.

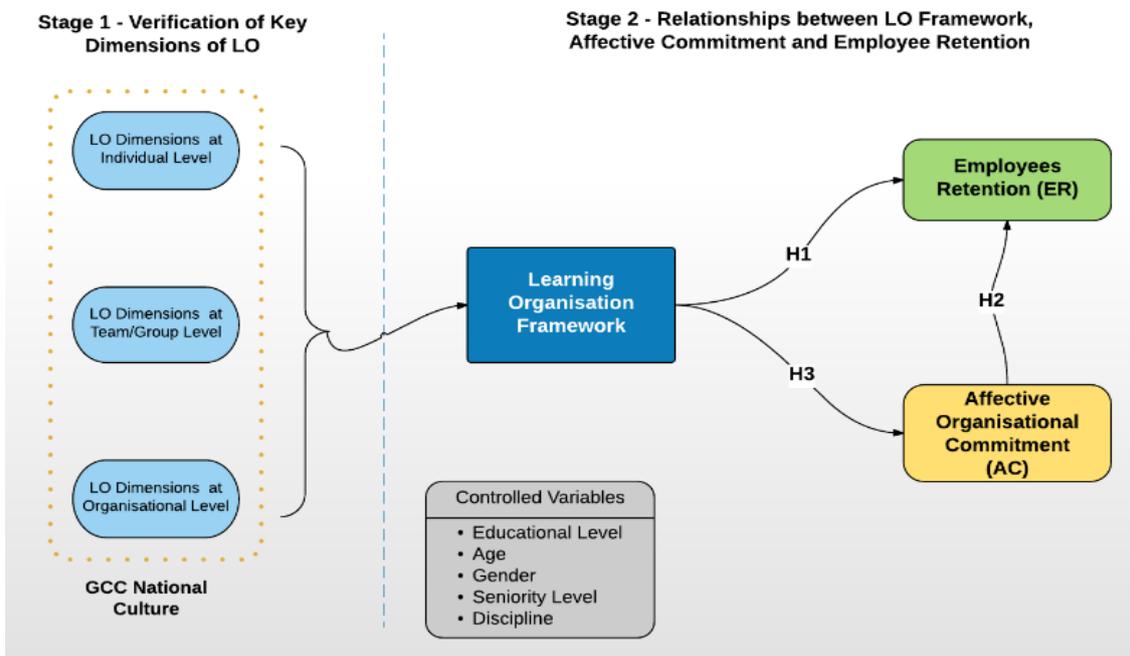


Figure 1: Hypotheses Model

The quantitative strategy dominates to determine the relationship between variables. The hypotheses discussed in the previous chapter are to be tested in order to determine these relationships. In other words, the research follows a deductive approach. Additionally, it is planned to investigate the reality behind these relationships through investigating the effect of the GCC national culture on the verification of key dimensions of LO. Therefore, from the research perspective, the positivism approach is the most useful approach.

The epistemology of the research impacts the design approach selected. Hence, the design of the research is more or less follows the Cross-sectional design, which is also known as “nomothetic”. In other words, it is more concerned with generating statements that apply regardless of time (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Although the research focuses on engineering organisations in the GCC, the research does not deeply investigate one organisation. Moreover, the organisations are working in different countries, which can make finer distinctions between them. The research is mainly concerned with studying relationship between variables.

Stage one

To reiterate, the GCC work environment is a challenging one due to the high dependency on expatriate workers (Hvidt, 2013). This resulted in the creation of culture barriers between the nationals and the expatriate workers. These barriers include giving priority to nationals for financial rewards, status and promotions to GCC nationals on the account of expatriate workers.

According to Gray (2004) and Bryman and Bell (2011), the qualitative research strategy is concerned with words more than numbers for better understanding of the reality of the social world through talk and interactions. Therefore, the qualitative research strategy will provide the required level of interaction and talking with participant to understand the impact of the national culture on their perception of Learning Organisation.

Therefore, the first stage will involve a number of semi-structured interviews with senior managers (7 to 10 individuals) to understand current perception on LO, identify any new dimension associated with the GCCC work environment and consider the culture as a critical factor in supporting LO. Semi-structured interviews, which provide a level of flexibility to introduce new questions for deeper understanding of the area of concern. Moreover, the interviewing is the most widely employed data collection method in qualitative research strategy (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

Stage two

Key dimensions of LO identified over stage one will be verified and measured. This stage will be testing hypotheses to measure the correlations between the research variables. These variables include the key dimensions of LO verified at the first stage at different levels, AC and Employees Retention. In order for these hypotheses to be tested, numerical data need to be collected. This refers to as “deductive” approach, which leads to the employment of quantitative strategy (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Moreover, similar empirical studies such as Dirani (2009) who has conducted a quantitative study to investigate the correlations between the dimensions of LO, OC and job satisfaction within banking sector in Lebanon. He has used a survey based on the DLOQ developed by Marsick and Watkins for data collection. The adaption of a qualitative strategy will provide additional material to eliminate the limitations of the quantitative strategy and increase the accuracy of the research findings (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The second stage will involve a survey with individual engineers (120 to 160 individuals) in various engineering organisations across the GCCC. The survey will comprise questionnaires, which will be developed by bundling together DLOQ, Meyer and Allen’s Scales and items related to employees’ retention. Demographic items including age, experience, gender, educational level, discipline will also be included in the survey.

Ethics and design factors

Although the native language in the GCCC is the Arabic, but it is not planned to translate the scales. The sample framing is formed of professional who know and practice the English language. Therefore, it is not expected to have an impact on the reliability and validity of the scales. As mentioned before, these scales were already scientifically tested and used in several studies. However, it is expected to have some minor modifications to some words to make it clearer and more in line with the used terminologies within the engineering organisations. Therefore, pilot test will be conducted with 5-6 individuals from the sample framing to examine the validity of the survey.

With regard to the reliability, it is planned to run Cronbach's α reliability test using SPSS for all scales before testing the hypotheses.

With regard to the qualitative method, it is also planned to conduct a pilot test for the Semi-structured interview before conducting the actual interviews. Two expert researchers will be consulted with regard to the clarity, validity and procedure of the interviews. In addition to the ethical issue, there is micro-political issue that need to be overcome. While investigating his current employer's organisation, the author will make sure to do not involve into the organisation politics. Moreover, the research is investigating the employees' commitment in the GCCC, so the author will make sure to avoid any political issues related to these countries or their citizens.

Research impact

The funding issues in the GCCC due the oil and gas prices (Hvidt, 2013; EIU, 2014, Kuwait Times, 2015), organisations in the GCCC started to downsize as part of what is known in the region as "business efficiency review" (Doha News, 2016). Management Consultancy firms such as McKenzie, PWC and Ernst & Young are closely working with organisations in the GCC to have a smooth and efficient restructure and downsizing. In addition, part of this is to retain talented and qualified employees and increase their commitments for organisations survival. However, this needs to be achieved through factors other than the financial rewards. Therefore, the study will provide useful insights to inform future planning and learning strategies. The study is also expected to provide critical insights as to how organisations can improve current practice. This will be achieved by filling current knowledge gap and extend the body of knowledge around the LO to cover non-western regions. It will also have an impact on different stakeholders including leaders and employees by assessing how to improve the work environment for better business learning practice. Engineering organisations will be able to assess the importance of LO in increasing their competitive advantage and respond faster into today's challenging learning challenges.

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