

National Culture Influences on the Execution of GCC Megaprojects

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ABSTRACT

Megaproject research has tended to focus on size, complexities, budget overruns and late delivery, whereas other influences on megaprojects delivery, such as cultural impacts are less well studied. Work by others has considered such forces in megaprojects in Asia, Europe and Central America and these studies have addressed the mostly negative tension a lack of cultural congruence has placed on the project execution. There remains a significant research gap to examine such impacts in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and this paper looks to address this knowledge gap.

In 2020, there are over 200 megaprojects in different stages of execution in the GCC, with a forecast construction expenditure approaching \$800 billion. Over 150 western consultants serve this market and frequently report problems relating to high staff turnover and staff retention. This research investigates whether national culture influences the departure of western consultant's staff, thus curtailing their ability to perform. A detailed case study examines these cultural experiences, focusing on the experience of senior staff members, as recounted in a series of structured interviews during 2018/19. This case study identifies significant impacts and proposes an agenda for further research focusing on exploring cultural influences at social and professional levels. The initial case study finds that western consultants are generally ill-prepared for cultural differences in the GCC. The initial research indicates that cultural issues are a factor that contributes to a high turnover of consultancy staff. This suggests that cultural misalignment could contribute to commercial losses for western consultants, which may include both financial and intangible losses. The hidden costs include such factors as disruption or delay to service delivery, which in turn contributes to the deferred execution of affected megaprojects. Although further research is required, initial findings indicate that cultural awareness training and preparation can go some way to support greater cultural congruence.

Keywords: Influences on megaprojects, GCC cultural influences, megaproject culture.

1. GCC MEGAPROJECTS

Megaprojects are typically described as large-scale, complex ventures costing a billion dollars or more, projects that take many years to develop and build, that involve multiple public and

private stakeholders, and that are transformational and impact on millions of people (Davies, Dodgson, Gann, & Macaulay, 2017; Flyvberg, 2017; Mok, Shen, & Yang, 2015; Pollack, Biesenthal, Sankaran, & Clegg, 2018a; Turner, 2018). Megaprojects have been described as wild beasts hard to tame (Zidane, Johansen, & Ekambaram, 2013), and typical megaproject characteristics include their complexity, size, cost, risk, stakeholder management issues, and governance issues (Walsh & Walker, 2020). There are presently many active megaprojects in the Middle East and within the Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) states of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. Deloitte, (2016) estimates that the GCC has a pipeline of megaprojects under construction or in planning amounting to US\$2 trillion, with 200 active megaprojects as at December 2018 (Walsh & Walker, 2019). GCC project developers outsource much of the project management for the construction execution of these megaprojects, to western consultants. External consultant engagement is a necessity, as the GCC has a skill shortfall to undertake such mega ventures, as indicated in Table 1.

	GCC State	Total Population	Expatriate Population	Expatriates Residents	% Expats in Construction	GDP USD Billion	Value of Construction USD, Billion
1	Qatar	2,639,211	2,111,369	80 %	50%	167.605	46.4
2	KSA	32,938,213	10,500,000	32 %	36%	683.827	109
3	UAE	9,400,145	7,800,000	83 %	30%	382.575	87.7
4	Kuwait	4,136,528	2,895,570	70 %	17%	120.126	12.6
5	Oman	4,636,262	2,086,318	45 %	31%	72.643	15.2
6	Bahrain	1,492,584	666,000	45 %	22%	35.307	7.7
7	Totals	55,242,943	26,059,256	47 %	31%	1,462,083	279

Table 1 – Abstracted from Walsh & Walker, 2019

This paper focuses on understanding the cultural influences in managing GCC megaprojects and the implications of this for successful project delivery.

2. CULTURE

Culture is described as a ‘complex, inaccessible, fuzzy, holistic phenomena’ (Alvesson, 2002), which attempts to capture the ‘values, beliefs, knowledge and understanding’, shared by a group of people with a common purpose (Hilson, 2013). Any attempt to precisely measure intangible “values and beliefs” is a complex and challenging process (G. Hofstede, 1991; Koopman et al., 1999; Schwartz, 2012). Some argue that it is ‘attempting to measure the unmeasurable’ (Mcsweeney, 2002). For the focus of this paper, Hofstede’s definition of national culture is adopted, which considers national culture as ‘the name we give to that which distinguishes the people of one country from those of another’ (Gert Jan Hofstede, Paul B. Pedersen, 2002 pxviii).

3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The research described in this paper adopts a two-phase approach: firstly, through literature review and secondly through empirical field research. This approach is shown diagrammatically in Figure 2.

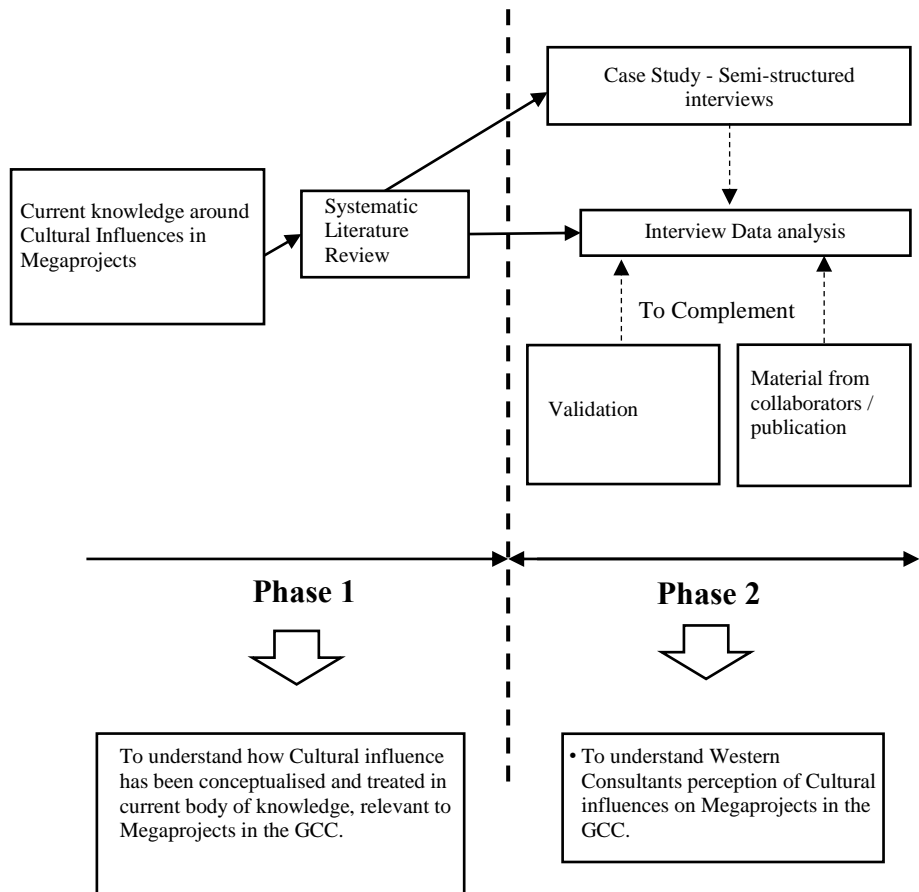


Figure 2– Conceptual representation of the research method adopted from Teo and Loosemore (2014)

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been limited research examining the extent to which national culture exerts influence on construction projects in the GCC. This has been explored by amongst others Harrison and Michailova, (2012) Baumann, (2013) At-Twajjri and Al-Muhaiza, (1996) Newman and Nollen, (2016) Jaeger and Adair, 2013 and Mais Sartari (2010). Haak-Saheem (2016) outlines specific disparities between GCC and western culture. Harrison & Michailova (2012) studied the roles of expatriate females living in the GCC. Baumann (2013) specifically focused on time overruns related to National Culture influences. At-Twajjri and Al-Muhaiza, (1996) studied the GCC’s oil industry, and Sartari (2010) conducted specific research examining one particular group of western consultants. Haak-Saheem (2016) specifically researched the potential introduction of public-private partnerships in the GCC. Al-hashemi (2016) reviewed the influences of organisational culture on Kuwait’s construction industry. There are also several cross-cultural studies suggesting differing cultural approaches to management within the GCC, including work by Bakhtari, (1995); Chapman, (2004); and Jaeger and Adair, (2013).

There are well-documented cases of cultural clashes associated with megaprojects in Europe and other western regions. Recent studies include the OMEGA megaproject in France (a French high-speed rail system), works undertaken by Netlipse (an extensive infrastructure network projects in Europe), Nabucco -a 1300 km pipeline through Turkey, Austria, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary (Kardes, 2013), the Panama Canal expansion project (Smits and Brownlow, 2017), and a Siberian gas megaproject between Russia and Norway (van den Ende and van Marrewijk, 2015). These studies highlight volatility in the relationships between different national cultures temporarily joined together to complete a megaproject. These studies have asserted that cultural congruence is critical for the successful execution of megaprojects (Mišić & Radujković, 2015). However, little attention has been directed to the impact of culture upon GCC megaprojects, to date. There is a current gap in knowledge explicitly relating to the effects of cultural dissonance on GCC megaprojects. Research on European megaprojects has interrogated the performance of global megaprojects (Biesenthal, Clegg, Mahalingam, & Sankaran, 2018; Smits & Brownlow, 2017; van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2015). These studies provide a clear indication that cultural issues amongst the management team, and leadership and governance issues, represented a significant risk during the lifecycle of the project. A specialised study specifically questioning the common causes of execution failure of global megaprojects concluded that megaprojects are ‘large bundles of risk compounded at every corner, including political, financial, time and culture’ and ‘strongly recommends’ that cultural dissonance is considered as a risk factor within all future megaprojects (Merron, 1988 p vi).

5. CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

This research utilises the principles of grounded theory as a fruitful way of exploring a substantive area about which little is known (Barrett & Sutrisna, 2009). Qualitative studies were used to gain insight into cross-cultural training effectiveness, (Barrett & Sutrisna, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Prior, 2008; Saunders et al., 2008) and the research draws on the experience of practising participants, using semi-structured interviews. Cultural investigations were aided by field-based research selecting a representative GCC megaproject, based in Qatar. The case study focused on the three principal consultants managing the execution of a megaproject in Qatar. The western consultants were headquartered in Germany, the USA and the UK. The churn rate of senior western consultants was monitored and mapped on a programme. Investigations identified the turnover for each position, indicating both the tenure of that position and the number of times the same position was filled. In terms of overall posts, this mapping process confirmed that the GCC project sponsor had approved 28 senior positions. This case study considers only the most senior positions within these organisations. This purposeful restriction was applied (28 posts out of 733 consultants), as they were the consultant’s representatives directly engaged regularly (typically daily) in interacting and responding to the project sponsor. There were 64 individuals involved in filling these 28 positions, over four years. The pilot study investigated the factors which influenced this turnover.

6. SYNOPSIS OF CASE STUDY FINDINGS

This analysis found that 21 professionals either left due to natural reasons (3 remain), with the professionals electing to leave for personal goals, such as retirement or a desire to return home. The remaining 40 professionals were removed due to factors influenced by cultural dissonance. The case study identifies five principle reasons behind the sponsors' decision to remove the consultants. The social issues (findings 2&5 impacted 14 persons **35%**), were related to a lack

of respect or courtesy being shown, ethical concerns concerning the treatment of females in the workplace and suspicions of inappropriate closeness with construction contractors performing the works. Professional concerns (findings 1,3&4 impacted 26 persons **65%**) were related to a perceived unwillingness, being considered too inactive, not adopting local standards or perception of failure to manage a multi-cultural workforce.

The case study identified social and professional issues, as follows:

Professional norms to be respected	27 Staff Removed
Finding 1: Perceptions of being too slow or not active enough	11 Staff Removed
Finding 3: Lack of flexibility in the adoption of local norms	9 Staff Removed
Finding 4: Failure to manage the multi-cultural Workforce	7 Staff Removed

Finding 1: A unilateral determination by the sponsor that the individual consultant did not appear dynamic enough to justify the level of expertise that the position commanded. Cross-cultural advisors describe an Arabic tendency to multitask. This characteristic explains how Arabs exhibit multi-linear, multi-active tendencies (Lewis, 2016). Such trends may manifest as appearing extrovert, impatient, talkative, curious, does several things at once, not punctual, changes plans, juggles plans, delegates to relations. In practice, it is common to seek out the top management and frequently interrupts (Lewis, 2016).

Finding 3: The sponsor expressed concerns at the consultant rigidity in norms applied. A perceived lack of flexibility or overrigid interpretations of contract documents or practices or insistence on a home country standard can paradoxically be interpreted as ‘non-professional’. Global consultancies are continually struggling to harmonise their core policies globally (Schein, 2004; Trompenaars & Woolliams, 2006). There are some aspects to each profession that cannot carry through all regions, so rather than insist on replicating each specific standard from the home country a ‘healthy dose of particularism’ is often required (Trompenaars & Woolliams, 2001). Other work highlights that expatriates should be open to personal adjustment - a willingness to communicate, improve social orientation, active stress resistance and openness capacity are described as crucial to the adjustment process (Waxin, 2004, p. 15).

Finding 4: Multi-Cultural Management. The sponsor expressed the view that some of the managers were ‘unable to control their teams’. Failure to manage a team became an issue in several cases where the senior manager was not seen to be able to coordinate and control his works / junior managers. These failures were noted through instances where the team leader allowed disruption of project meetings, policies and approaches were not in line with local norms, or the manager was not considered to be sufficiently engaged with the project's requirements. Team management is also indirectly related to what is described as an Arab multi-linear tendency (Lewis, 2016). Failures or delays in ensuring works are completed to deadlines was also perceived as inexperienced management. The sponsor expects active leadership and guidance from the consultant. Leadership is considered as a global challenge, and not restricted to the GCC. The prescreening and acceptance criteria for engagement were designed to ensure the leadership skills were adequate for the project. From the onset, it is likely that the consultant will become part of a ‘cultural soup’, and may benefit from experience with the management of multicultural teams (Zein, 2015; Ochieng & Price, 2009).

Social Norms to be respected

13 Staff Removed

Finding 2: Public Displays of Criticism and Unacceptable Behaviours 10 Staff Removed

Finding 5: Ethical Concerns 3 Staff Removed

Finding 2: The sponsor removed several consultants due to public confrontation with the sponsors' staff. Participants described that by challenging the sponsors' authority, this makes the project sponsor's staff appear less knowledgeable, leading to a loss of face. This emotional dimension 'face' is derived from a Chinese concept described as 'dignity based on a correct relationship between a person and the collectives to which he belongs' Hofstede, (1983, p.7). Research by Inglehart (2018), indicates that while society has generally become more tolerant over the years, the concept of face is still prominent within the Middle East. It is suggested that a loss of face occurs through 'insult or criticism in front of others' (Hammerich & Lewis, 2013).

Finding 5: Three consultants were also removed from office for ethical considerations; on two occasions, the sponsor suspected the employees to be working too closely with a construction contractor. While ethical issues are a global phenomenon, it is noteworthy that one consultant was also removed for allegedly crossing boundaries with female Qatari staff. National characteristics associated with Arab nations confirm they are family orientated, conservative, religious, and consultative (Bakhtari, 1995; Erin, 2014; Moran, Harris, & Moran, 2011).

7. THE COSTS OF IGNORING CULTURAL RISK

This case study has identified the departure of 40 western consultants on a GCC megaproject, for issues arising from, or the result of, cultural dissonance. Alder (2013) suggests that difficulty in adjusting to a different culture – culture shock - is both a psychological and cultural issue. The expatriate is often exposed to a culture alien to their own and frequently return to their country of origin because they fail to integrate to his host country. Recent research indicates that between 10 – 20 % of people from the USA return early due to 'job dissatisfaction or culture shock' (Black and Gregersen, 1999). It is suggested that the employer incurs costs for every premature departure ranging from \$50,000 to \$1,000,000 per employee (Harrison, 1994, p.18; Leiß, 2013 p.29). While 10-20% of American expatriates and up to 40% of all expatriate assignments are alleged to fail (Naeem, Nadeem, & Khan, 2015, p. 250). Although based on a small sample, this case study indicates that 63 % (40 out of 64) of western consultants associated with the projects studied in the GCC were removed from their assignment. This calculation does not attempt to quantify the intangible costs associated with the early departure of key personnel. This field research recognised additional impacts on the megaproject, including project disruption, lowering staff morale, loss of momentum on the project and loss of the consultant's professional reputation

8. PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF CULTURAL TRAINING

Despite an awareness of the need to respect societal norms, there appears to be minimal guidance or preparation for western consultants entering the GCC, (Walsh & Walker 2019). These preliminary findings are based on semi-structured interviews with 27 project directors engaged directly with megaprojects throughout the GCC. The participants were requested to recount their experiences with cultural integration and culture shock to understand the practical implications and integration challenges in the GCC. A series of questions were asked concerning GCC preparation; specific training offered, the perceived need for specific cultural

training, and any other related training needs. Most respondents (21/27) reported that they did not feel culturally prepared for the GCC. Based on their experiences to date in the GCC, they were asked to consider if training would be useful or appropriate. The majority suggested that training would be beneficial, although the format of this training ranged from a half-day workshop discussing ‘basic cultural awareness’ to a seminar over several days. A frequent recommendation included attending a cultural awareness conference, but no broader consensus was evident. Some participants indicated that they benefitted from their informal communications with expatriate colleagues who were involved in the same project.

A small number of respondents (five) had received some form of cultural preparation for the GCC before entering the GCC. Two consultancy firms had provided employees with a booklet on cultural practices during induction, and two respondents had attended a workshop (lasting two and four hours respectively). One participant described the benefits he perceived through an MBA from the University of Strathclyde, which they felt provided ‘excellent’ preparation for overseas ventures. While most consultants were in favour of training, others felt the process could not be thought as cultural integration was an integral part of one’s personality. Participants were asked whether they believed that training should be best delivered in-house or by an external consultant. From the responses given, many favoured an internal consultant, although the majority did not have firm views as to the best form of delivery being either internal or external consultancies. There were further training queries related to the leadership of megaprojects. In summary, most participants responded that additional training was required. The variety of training proposed included ten suggestions for enhanced communication skills, four suggesting the teaching of the Arabic language and a range of training including cultural awareness, empathy and people and intercultural management.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Research concerning the influences of cultural dissonance on the execution of megaprojects to date has tended to focus on European and American megaprojects, such as the Panama Canal and channel tunnel (Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, & Rothengatter, 2003; Pollack, Biesenthal, Sankaran, & Clegg, 2018b; van Marrewijk, Smits, Clegg, Pitsis, & Veenswijk, 2008). These studies identify the potentially negative impact of cultural dissonance on megaprojects, with research examining the most common causes of megaproject failures recommending that the management of cultural integration be considered ‘within all future megaprojects’ (Merron, 1988 pvi). Despite such findings, there is little apparent research to date, which explores this issue in the context of the large number of megaprojects in the GCC. The GCC is an ideal setting in which to study multi-cultural megaprojects, with a relatively low professional skill base, and high capital expenditure on megaprojects (Walsh & Walker, 2019, p. 231) which results in the GCC importing construction expertise to manage the execution of these works. There are both personal and professional social conventions to be considered in the GCC. There are more significant risks associated with cultural miscommunication at professional levels. The case study findings indicated that once key project personnel were removed, respondents cited a slowdown in project productivity, an increased perception of job instability, and reduced morale, all because of such removals.

Ongoing research will extend the case study to more fully capture western consultants’ views concerning GCC cultural integration. A picture is emerging from the western consultant’s perspective, that the project sponsors’ output demands and project programmes are frequently unrealistic. Also emerging from social integration questioning are accounts of extended working hours, leading to a poor work/life balance. Respondents reported finding professional

integration a lengthy process, often claiming that it required up to eighteen months to ‘integrate’ and ‘gain acceptance’. The research finds both a need and a willingness to engage in cross-cultural training, a process that may reduce the high levels of staff turnover, and save costs associated with the replacement of senior consultants, which have been estimated at up to \$1 million per head.

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