

SMEs strategies to enhance innovative work behavior of employees in United Arab Emirates (UAE)

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Abstract

People are considered to be a key enablers of innovation since they initiate the change as well as become part of a change which positively affects the innovation process. UAE is known to be an innovation-driven economy while the practices of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in UAE are little known. This paper aims to explore the strategies adopted by SME sector in UAE to enhance innovative work behaviour of employees. In this study, the researcher adopted the qualitative research to explore the strategies adopted by SMEs in UAE to enhance innovative work behaviour. A survey was conducted with 74 managers/ supervisors and leaders of SMEs in UAE through a structured questionnaire which attempted to ask about the strategies, how these are practiced by SMEs and what is the impact of these strategies on the innovative work behaviour. It was found from the research that the opportunity enhancing strategies namely autonomy, task composition and feedback positively impact innovative work behaviour of employees in UAE while ability enhancing strategy (training and development) and three motivation-enhancing strategies (reward and recognition, job security and employee involvement/ engagement).

Keywords: Innovation, innovative work behaviour, strategies, employees.

Introduction

Businesses need to offer value to all its stakeholders and constantly remain relevant to the changing needs of market or customers. The way(s) businesses evolve unique ways to deliver value or offering solutions to problems in a novel way, and the best experiences to its customers or markets will determine the success of any business in the competitive market. Innovation is all about implementation of new ideas in offering new products, services, processes, technologies, business models (Lijster, 2018) to deliver value to its customers or markets, innovation is considered imperative for the firms to be successful and to gain growth in today's extremely complex and competitive global economy. Innovation define the companies success in the market place to compete (Baregheh, Rowley, & Sambrook,

2009). For various contemporary institutions, innovation is regarded as a priority since it leads to finding solutions by thinking creatively and differently resulting in a significant impact on social and economic value (Kahn, 2018). People are found to be a key enabler of innovation in firms as found by previous literature (Li et al, 2019; Dalton, 2017; Palacios-Marqués et al, 2015). Human resources contribute significantly since innovation can be implemented only with the utilisation of the people skills (Meyer & Leitner, 2018).

For Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), the development of new products or processes that meets the needs of customers will determine how these companies will make profits and survive in competition (O'Regan & Ghobadian,

2006). The innovative practices offering new products or services or practices of markets and administrative procedures of SMEs will support these companies to overcome their challenges in the competitive market and improve their performance (Damanpour, 1992; Johannessen et al., 2001). To be innovative, companies must improve innovative work behaviour of their employees (De Spiegelaere, Van Gyes, & Van Hootegeem, 2014).

In UAE (United Arab Emirates), 94 percent of companies are SMEs, supporting the country to earn 60 percent of its GDP, SMEs in UAE contribute to 86 percent of total private sector workforce (Mishrif & Al-Naamani, 2018). The report of GE Global Innovation Barometer found that United Arab Emirates is amongst the other countries that are engaged in innovative initiatives in its major industries like environment and energy, aerospace, logistics and transport. However, there is little research on the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) sector in the UAE. This paper aims to explore the strategies adopted by SME sector in UAE to enhance innovative work behaviour of employees.

Literature review

People as an enabler of innovation

Various resources are needed for the successful implementation of innovation in firms including financial resources as well as technological and human competencies. The most crucial resource is people (Li et al., 2019). Human resources form one of the key resources for executing innovation ideas irrespective of the type of innovation since employees are required to cooperate and work together for making innovation possible (Wang et al.,

making innovation possible (Wang et al., 2021). Other than the executor of innovation, employees are also the source of innovation by generating ideas and offering unique solutions to problems (Lee et al., 2018). Employees act individually as well as team members and use their creative minds and skills to directly or indirectly contribute in the implementation of innovation (Palacios-Marqués et al., 2015). Employees come together to suggest the ideas, experiment and execute them as well as analysing the important factors involved and evaluate the probability of its success by conducting mandatory investigation to reduce the chances of failure (Dalton, 2017). Because of the impact of employees' skills on the innovation outcomes as well as their contribution in the planning and execution of innovation ideas, it is crucial that employees' creativity is applied in a committed manner (Van Minh et al., 2017).

Innovative work behaviour of employees

Innovative work behaviour of employees refers to all employee behaviour which encourages the new idea generation and its execution with the aim of implementation innovation in a firm (Pradhan & Jena, 2019). The behaviour encourages the employees to take the initiatives and go out of the way to perform certain duties with the aim of suggesting and implementing innovative ideas. The employees are regarded as a vital factor in the implementation of innovation since they are likely to initiate change as well as accept the change initiated by someone else (Fan et al., 2020). Provided with a conducive environment, support and resources and given a clear vision, employees can be a significant force in a firm bringing an innovative change (Nazir & Islam, 2020). When firms offer favourable conditions to employees, they feel motivated to generate new ideas and

initiate and implement change effectively (Bos-Nehles et al., 2017). The innovative work behaviour is something which can be achieved through a number of interventions since employees behaviour can be manipulated through supportive factors making them behave in a certain manner (Stoffers et al., 2020).

Strategies to enhance innovative work behaviour of employees

Humans are complex organisms who have their independent thinking but can be driven by a number of factors (Thomas et al., 2017). Organisations use a number of strategies to make the employees behave the way they want with the aim of improving performance and productivity. Enhancing innovative work behaviour also requires implementation of some strategies. Bos-Nehles et al. (2017) and Vermeeren (2017) categorise the strategies into three categories, namely ability-enhancing strategies (training and development); motivation-enhancing strategies (reward and recognition, job security, employee engagement/involvement) and opportunity-enhancing strategies (autonomy, task-composition, feedback).

Developing employees' creative skills is a key strategy to enhance their innovative behaviour (Montag-Smit & Maertz, 2017). As the business environment is continuously changing with technological advancements and process re-engineering being widely accepted as a means for increase in efficiency, there is a need for employees to regularly upgrade their skills and make themselves fit for the agile environment (Newman et al., 2018). Training and development enhance the abilities of the

employees and make them more competent to initiate and bring changes needed for the innovation implementation. Highly trained and up-to-date employees are more likely to show innovative work behaviour because of their upgraded skills and expertise (Capozza & Divella, 2019).

When employees are motivated through appropriate strategies like rewards and recognition, job security and employee engagement/involvement, they tend to contribute more towards the innovation environment (Fischer et al., 2019). Engaging and involving employees in the innovation activities make them motivated to implement change (Ahmed et al., 2018). Similarly, motivating employees through rewards and recognition for their innovative work behaviour encourage them to go extra mile for performing their tasks and initiating change by generating and implementing ideas (Choi et al., 2019). Providing job security is another strategy which enhances employee psychological contract with the organisations making them exhibit innovative work behaviour (Varma et al., 2017).

Strategies like providing employees sufficient autonomy, composing their tasks such that to include routine as well as non-routine tasks and complex tasks and providing them with regular feedback on their performance enhances innovative work behaviour in employees since these enhance the opportunities for the employees (Vermeeren, 2017). Employees behaviour get enhanced by the provision of such opportunities leading to cause and effect relationship (Rao, 2016).

By implementing appropriate strategies, the innovative work behaviour of employees can

be enhanced making the employees contribute towards innovation decision-making and implementation. They can also support the management in collecting the data for innovation purpose.

Innovation in UAE

UAE was ranked in the top 38 innovative driven economies in 2016 (Bani-Melhem et al., 2018). UAE has been emerging as a country having a positive attitude towards innovation with the government taking significant measures leading it to be an innovation-driven economy (Parahoo et al., 2017). The country is regarded to have a strong awareness towards innovation making the customers more demanding and causing the firms to adopt innovative practices to meet the changing customer preferences (Mohamed et al., 2019). The literature is found to be limited on the innovation practices of SME sector in the country. However, the recent 18% growth trends in the industry with 20% expected growth in the upcoming years hints towards the implementation of innovation measures by SMEs in the country.

Conceptual model

As the people are regarded as one of the key enablers of innovation, it is considered imperative for organisations to enhance their innovative work behaviour. The above discussion leads to the identification of key strategies which can be used to enhance the innovative work behaviour in employees. The study adopts Bos-Nehles et al. (2017) and Vermeeren (2017) categorises of the strategies which can affect innovative work behaviour, namely ability-enhancing strategies (training and development); motivation-enhancing

strategies (reward and recognition, job security, employee engagement/ involvement) and opportunity-enhancing strategies (autonomy, task-composition, feedback). The strategies are noted to be independent variable which affects the innovative work behaviour making it a dependent variable. The conceptual model developed for the research is presented in Figure 1 below:

The following hypotheses are developed for the research:

H1: Ability-enhancing strategies have a positive influence on innovative work behaviour of employees in the UAE's SME sector.

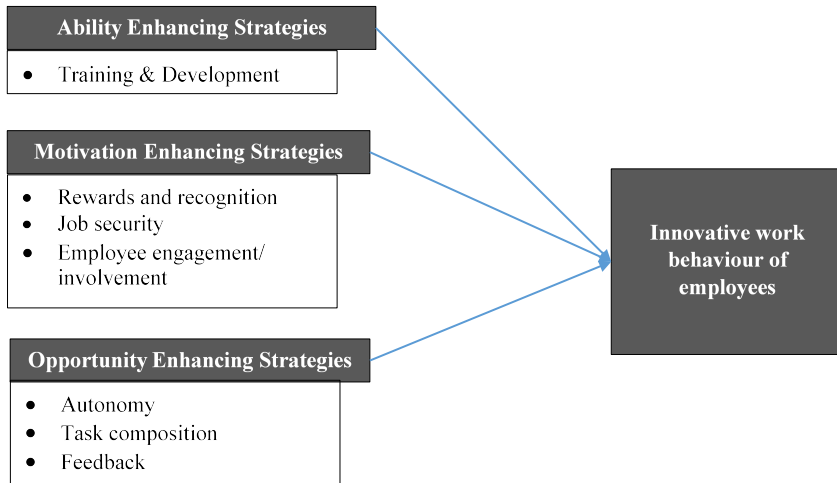
H2: Motivation-enhancing strategies have a positive influence on innovative work behaviour of employees in the UAE's SME sector

H3: Opportunity-enhancing strategies have a positive influence on innovative work behaviour of employees in the UAE's SME sector

Methodology

This research adopts a positivist philosophy as scientific approach to collect and analyse the data is considered appropriate to study the relationship between the strategies adopted by SMEs in UAE and the innovative work behaviour of employees (Ryan, 2018). The theory as inferred from the previous research about the impact of appropriate strategies on innovative work behaviour is tested in the present research by formulating the hypotheses, gathering the data and analysing it test the hypothesis in the specific context of SME sector in UAE. Data is collected through quantitative approach by conducting a survey using a pre-designed questionnaire. The questionnaire uses likert scale questions as well as multiple choice questions to collect the data from the respondents.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model for Enhancing Innovative Work Behaviour of Employees



The sample consists of the managers/ supervisors and leaders in SME sector in UAE. Purposive sampling is done to identify the eligible respondents for the survey. The sample size planned was 100 out of which 76 filled and usable questionnaires were received. The survey was conducted via email. The data was analysed through SPSS software since it was quantitative in nature needing statistical analysis to assess the relationships between the independent variables (strategies) and dependent variables (innovative work behaviour of employees).

The respondents' participation was voluntary and their consent was taken. Moreover, the respondents were informed about the aim of the research and that the data will not be disclosed to any third party.

The reliability of the measurement scale was calculated through Cronbach alpha and the score was found to be 0.556.

Results

Demographics

Out of 100 potential respondents contacted for the survey, only 76 replied with completed and useable returned questionnaires. Majority of the respondents (N=41; 54%) were line managers with 2.04 mean and 0.682 SD showing data points to be closer to mean. A high proportion of the respondents (N=47; 62%) were in the age group of 35-49 years with mean value 2.86 and SD 0.65. 45% of the respondents (N=34) had experience of 11-15 years with mean value 3.62 and a higher SD value of 0.748 indicating a larger spread of data values. Out of 76 respondents, majority (N= 41; 54%) held Masters degree with 1.62 mean value and a lower SD value of 0.565.

Table 1: Demographics of the Survey Respondents

		N	%	Mean	SD
Job Role	Senior management	16	21.10%	2.04	0.682
	Line manager	41	53.90%		
	Team leaders	19	25.00%		
Age Category	Less than 25	0	0.00%	2.86	0.605
	25 – 34	20	26.30%		
	35 – 49	47	61.80%		
	50 – 64	9	11.80%		
Experience	Less than 1 year	1	1.30%	3.62	0.748
	1 – 5	1	1.30%		
	6 – 10	32	42.10%		
	11 – 15	34	44.70%		
	Over 15 years	8	10.50%		
Education	Bachelors	32	42.10%	1.62	0.565
	Masters	41	53.90%		
	PhD	3	3.90%		
	Others	0	0.00%		
Total		76	100%		

Correlations

The survey aimed to assess the relationships between strategies adopted to enhance innovative work behaviour with the innovative work behaviour to evaluate how the strategies affect the behaviour. Table 2 presents the correlations matrix for the variables. It can be seen that there is positive linear correlation between employee engagement and autonomy (0.250) showing that higher autonomy leads to better employee engagement. Positive correlations also found between employee engagement and task composition (0.457), and autonomy and task composition (0.244) confirming their strong relationships. Negative correlation was found between employee engagement and feedback (-0.230) showing that greater employee engagement leads to lesser feedback.

When the relationships between innovative work behaviour and various strategies were assessed, all the three opportunity enhancing strategies namely autonomy, task composition and feedback were found to be positively correlated with innovative work behaviour with values of 0.276, 0.254 and 0.259 respectively. This means that when employees were given autonomy, were provided with specific task composition and were given feedback, their innovative work behaviour was found to be improved. There was no positive relationship found between the ability enhancing strategy (training and development) and three motivation-enhancing strategies (reward and recognition, job security and employee involvement/engagement).

Table 2: Correlations between Variables

		Training and Development	Reward Recognition	Job Security	Employee Engagement	Autonomy	Task Composition	Feedback	Innovative Work Behavior
1. Ability-enhancing Strategies	Training and Development	1							
2. Motivation-enhancing Strategies	Reward Recognition	-.031	1						
	Job Security	-.003	.002	1					
	Employee Engagement	.034	.103	.132	1				
3. Opportunity-enhancing Strategies	Autonomy	.014	.016	.188	.250*	1			
	Task Composition	-.119	.045	.184	.244*	.457**	1		
	Feedback	.041	-.062	.139	-.230*	-.127	-.082	1	
Innovative work behaviour	Innovative Work Behavior	-.026	.154	.051	.099	.276*	.254*	.259*	1

Examining the Relationships

A simple linear regression was conducted to examine the three hypotheses, as proposed through the framework.

H1: Ability-enhancing strategies have a positive influence on innovative work behaviour of employees in the UAE's SME sector.

The regression analysis led to the rejection of the hypothesis 1 ($p > 0.05$) indicating that ability enhancing strategies (i.e. training and development) have no significant influence on the innovative work behaviour of employees in the SME sector of UAE. The correlation between the two variables was weak (0.026). Hence hypothesis 1 is rejected.

H2: Motivation-enhancing strategies have a positive influence on innovative work behaviour of employees in the UAE's SME sector.

The regression analysis led to the rejection of the hypothesis 2 ($p > 0.05$) indicating that motivation enhancing strategies (i.e. Reward and recognition, Job security, and employee engagement) have no significant influence on the innovative work behaviour of employees in the SME sector of UAE. Hence hypothesis 2 is rejected.

H3: Opportunity-enhancing strategies have a positive influence on innovative work behaviour of employees in the UAE's SME sector.

The linear regression conducted between the independent variable (opportunity enhancing strategies which include Autonomy, Task composition and Feedback) and the dependent variable (innovative work behaviour) led to significant outcome ($p < 0.05 = 0.02$). The correlation strength of the variables was 0.432 which is moderately strong whereas the variance caused by the independent variable in innovative work behaviour of employees was identified as 18.7%. Amongst the three sub-factors of opportunity-enhancing behaviour, only autonomy and feedback were found to have significant contribution ($p < 0.05$). Hence, the hypothesis 3 is accepted.

Table 3: Regression Analysis

Model Summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.432^a	.187	.153	3.04429		
ANOVA^b						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	153.502	3	51.167	5.521	.002^a
	Residual	667.274	72	9.268		
	Total	820.776	75			
Coefficients^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	14.157	3.763		3.763	.000
	Autonomy	.421	.214	.236	1.969	.05
	Task Composition	.329	.230	.171	1.430	.157
	Feedback	.622	.220	.303	2.824	.006

The examination identifies positive relationship between opportunity enhancing strategies namely autonomy, task composition and feedback with innovative work behaviour while no relationship between ability enhancing strategy (training and development) and three motivation-enhancing strategies (reward and recognition, job security and employee involvement/ engagement) and innovative work behaviour.

Discussion

People have been identified as one of the key enablers of innovation as evidenced from previous studies (Wang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2019; Dalton, 2017). Employees can play a key role in initiating the innovation as well as implementing it when introduced by the management. Provided with the favourable environment and supportive culture, employees act individually as well as the team members to initiate change, generate ideas and be part of the innovation implementation (Van Minh et al., 2017). Since organisations get their activities done through their employees who undertake a number of tasks for collectively achieving business objectives, innovation practices are greatly affected by employees' activities as well as behaviour (Akram et al., 2017). As employees can be made to behave in a desired way through adopting a number of strategies, the impact of these strategies on innovation needs to be assessed (Yi et al., 2019). Through conducting preliminary research, it was found that there is limited research on the SMEs industry in UAE on the area of innovation. This study thus attempted to survey the leaders in SMEs to know what strategies are being adopted by them to enhance the innovative work behaviour of employees.

From the findings of the survey, the SMEs in UAE were found to implement all the strategies to enhance the innovative work behaviour of employees which are found to be implemented to make the employee behave such that to generate new ideas, initiate the change and be a positive actor in innovation implementation. Previous studies (Bos-Nehles et al., 2017; Vermeeren, 2017) identified seven strategies grouped in three categories which can be implemented to enhance innovative work behaviour of employees namely one ability enhancing strategy (training and development), three motivation-enhancing strategies (reward and recognition, job security and employee involvement/ engagement) and innovative work behaviour and three opportunity enhancing strategies (autonomy, task composition and feedback). The findings confirmed that the SMEs in UAE implemented all these strategies to enhance the innovative work behaviour of their employees. The findings show strong commitment of the SME sector in the country towards implementing innovation and attempting to create a favourable environment by ensuring employees' innovative work behaviour is enhanced. The correlation analysis found that only opportunity enhancing strategies positively impact innovative work behaviour in SMEs in UAE as also supported by Vermeeren (2017) and Rao (2016).

The other two categories namely ability-enhancing and motivation-enhancing strategies did not impact the innovative work behaviour of employees in SMEs in UAE. This finding is contradictory to previous studies (Capozza & Divella, 2019; Fischer et al., 2019; Ahmed et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2019; Varma et al., 2017) which evidenced that training and development, reward and recognition, job security and

employee involvement/ engagement positively impact innovative work behaviour. The findings of the survey led to the determination of lesser impact of ability-enhancing and motivation-enhancing strategies on employees' innovative work behaviour which is striking since previous literature pointed out what training and development and motivating employees make them more creative and innovative (Waheed et al., 2019; Boadu et al., 2018; Sung & Choi, 2018). Surprisingly, the SMEs in the UAE seem to agree with the positive impact of training and development and motivation strategies in enhancing their innovative work behaviour as evident from their increased adoption of these strategies.

The impact of autonomy, task composition and feedback on enhancing employees' innovative work behaviour confirms the importance of two way communication with employees as well as delegation, employee empowerment and job design leading to enhanced innovative behaviour. When employees are given the autonomy and required feedback for their work which has been designed effectively to include routine, non-routine, complex and non-complex tasks, they are expected to behave innovatively and increase their contribution towards the innovation implementation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper attempted to explore the strategies adopted by SME sector in UAE to enhance innovative work behaviour of employees by conducting a survey of 74 managers/ supervisors and leaders in SME sector in UAE. It is concluded that opportunity enhancing strategies namely autonomy, task composition and feedback positively impact innovative work behaviour of employees in UAE while ability

enhancing strategy (training and development) and three motivation-enhancing strategies (reward and recognition, job security and employee involvement/ engagement) were not found to impact innovative work behaviour. Although the SMEs in UAE were found to be implemented by SMEs in UAE which shows their commitment towards enhancing the innovative work behaviour of their employees, it is recommended that the SMEs focus more on implementing the strategies namely autonomy, task composition and feedback to enhance their innovative work behaviour. The employees should be made autonomous and their tasks should be designed such that to include routine, non-routine, complex and non-complex tasks. Moreover, they should be given regular feedback on their activities. Since these strategies enhance the innovative work behaviour, the SMEs must focus on these strategies to ensure that the employees behave in a favourable way to implement the innovation successfully. By giving importance to these strategies, the capabilities can be directed in the right direction increasing the potential of innovation success.

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