**Voicing perceptions of local job seekers and employees toward workforce nationalization and employment**

**Abstract**

**Purpose –** This study explores local Qatari job seekers’ and employees’ perceptions of the workforce nationalization strategy to address an inadequacy in the workforce nationalization literature in Gulf Cooperation Council countries. It also unpacks the factors that attract or discourage local job seekers and employees when considering a new job.

**Design/methodology/approach –** Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 28 local job seekers who were either currently unemployed or employed and seeking another job at the time of the interviews.

**Findings –** The data revealed that nationals perceive Qatarization as a means to replace expatriate employees with nationals, particularly in the public sector and leadership positions. This misinterpretation of the strategy leads to complications, such as the waithood phenomenon and a sense of entitlement for guaranteed employment. The findings also provide insights into nationals’ attitudes toward employment, including job attraction and discouraging factors.

**Research limitations/implications** – The results provide policymakers with insights into the misinterpretation surrounding nationals’ perceptions of workforce nationalization and remedies for better implementation of the strategy.

**Originality/value –** The study addresses two clear gaps in the workforce nationalization literature: (1) examining how nationals perceive the workforce nationalization strategy and (2) unpacking the factors that make employment attractive or unfavorable for nationals.

**Keywords:** Workforce nationalization; Qatarization; Attitude toward employment; GCC countries; Qatar

**Introduction**

The discovery of vast supplies of natural gas reserves led to unprecedented economic growth in Qatar, effectively increasing the demand for both skilled and unskilled labor (Berrebi *et al*., 2009). However, as with the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the economic boom in Qatar resulted in a deficiency in the labor supply because Qatari nationals were unable to match the demand, especially within the private sector. Foreign workers account for approximately 73% of the workforce population in Qatar, second only to the UAE in the Middle East (Budhwar *et al*., 2019). Nevertheless, the GCC countries have never embraced the idea of alleviating labor shortages through mass citizenship schemes, citing fears that such programs can disrupt the prevailing social fabrics (Alsahi, 2020).

As with the rest of the GCC countries, Qatari policymakers perceived an increasing reliance on foreign labor and a shortage of suitably skilled local workers as a threat to the country’s long-term economic stability. Foreign labor employment is advantageous and costly for Gulf States (Muftah, 2016). Although the benefits of importing foreign labor are apparent, the explicit and implicit costs, including the mobilization and repatriation of labor, massive remittance, additional spending on education and health services, housing, roads, communications, and other infrastructure-related elements, are more challenging to calculate. Consequently, initiatives for workforce nationalization, defined as a model of lowering expatriate employment by increasing national employment (Randeree 2012), have become one of the most important and pressing policy agendas in the GCC countries (Elbanna, 2021; Hodgson and Hanson, 2014). As a workforce nationalization initiative, Qatarization is meant to provide permanent employment to Qatari citizens in both the public and private sectors. Several governmental institutions promote Qatarization as a national strategy that enables the development of a competent local workforce through education and training.

From a theoretical point of view, this research makes two contributions to the workforce nationalization literature in GCC countries. First, considerable attention in the workforce nationalization literature in GCC countries has focused on the implementation challenges and determinants of the effectiveness of the strategy from the employer’s perspective (Al-Ali, 2008; Al Ariss, 2014; Forstenlechner *et al.*, 2012; Forstenlechner and Mellahi, 2011; Rees *et al.*, 2007). However, despite the critical role of local job seekers and employees in the effective implementation of workforce nationalization, the literature remains salient regarding how they perceive the strategy. Thus, this study fills this knowledge gap by exploring the perceptions of job seekers and employees regarding workforce nationalization. This investigation is expected to open the door for policymakers to identify misconceptions about the strategy and its related complications and inform their remedies for better implementation.

Second, previous studies have identified an implicit social contract between the state in GCC countries and local citizens, through which the government guarantees their employment and provides them with secure and well-paid public jobs in exchange for their loyalty (Alfarhan and Al-Busaidi, 2018; Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010; Mellahi, 2007). Locals misinterpret this social contract and, consequently, tend to be reluctant to accept employment in the private sector (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020). Several previous studies in the GCC region have reported that locals prefer public sector employment (Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014; Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2012; [Babar, 2014](#_ENREF_3); Forstenlechner *et al.*, 2012; Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010; Randeree, 2012; Shayah and Sun, 2019), without unpacking the key factors that characterize attractive versus unfavorable employment, which represents a shortcoming in the workforce nationalization literature. As such, this study contributes to the limited conceptual and empirical research on locals’ career expectations and career choice behavior in the GCC countries.

Against this background and given the research gaps noted thus far, our study investigates the following key research questions: (1) How do local Qatari job seekers and employees perceive the workforce nationalization strategy? (2) What factors attract or discourage local Qatari job seekers and employees when considering a new job? Our study analyses and discusses the perceptions and image of the strategy among individuals whom the strategy targets to integrate into the workforce. It also explores the underlying attitudes and beliefs that shape Qatari job seekers’ and employees’ career expectations and career choice behavior.

**Theoretical background**

*The two-factor theory*

We examine the perceptions and factors affecting workforce nationalization through the lens of the two-factory theory. The two-factor theory, also known as the motivation-hygiene theory (Herzberg, 1987), attributes job satisfaction/dissatisfaction with a particular job to hygiene factors and motivators. Hygiene factors are extrinsic to the job, comprise the conditions surrounding the job, and are not related to the job itself. The presence of these factors encourages a job seeker to accept a particular job. When hygiene factors are not present, they discourage employees, although the presence of such conditions does not lead to either job satisfaction or strong motivation. These factors include an organization’s overall policies and regulations, management approaches, interpersonal relations with colleagues, subordinates and management, salary, job security, work–life balance, work hours, work conditions, and status. Hygiene factors are not direct motivators, but their absence is detrimental. Meanwhile, motivators relate to the nature and job content and lead to positive perceptions about the role and employees’ satisfaction and motivation. Motivators are intrinsic factors to the job and include such attributes as achievement, recognition, autonomy, growth prospects, and job responsibilities. Explicit in the theory is that intentional reasoning influences perceptions, decisions, and behaviors about a particular job (Sloman and Lagnado, 2015).

Motivators and hygiene factors for a particular job determine if individuals are encouraged or discouraged to accept a particular job and whether they like or dislike their job based on their identification of encouraging/discouraging factors (Holland *et al*., 2011). In sum, the theory stipulates that perceptions about a particular job and the resultant satisfaction are attributed to a set of motivators while dissatisfaction is the result of hygiene factors. Through the identification of relevant factors, employees adjust to their roles and contexts and become insiders rather than outsiders (Ryan, 2016). The theory further suggests that two separate sets of factors explain employees’ identification of a particular job and the dynamic interactions between an organization and the employee. The main assertion of the theory is that employees’ understanding of the job enables them to know their tasks and, hence, accept or reject the job (Harry, 2007).

Although some previous studies have established that Herzberg’s theory is a useful theoretical model to explain recruitment, selection, and retention (Sharp, 2008), other studies have challenged the basic tenets of the theory, citing that the presence of hygiene factors does not preclude the emergence of job dissatisfaction (Holmberg *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, contrasting the premises in the two-factor theory, some studies have found that extrinsic job factors are posited to affect motivation (e.g., Heneman and Werner, 2005; Stringer *et al.*, 2011). It has been also criticized for the rigid distinction between hygiene and motivator factors and its failure to capture differences in employees’ characteristics and job categories (Liang and Leh, 2019). Despite this critique, its holistic and contextually relevant considerations of the key factors surrounding a particular job represent an additional way to explore the current shortcomings of the workforce nationalization literature.

*Overview of workforce nationalization and Qatarization*

GCC countries are considered to be labor-importing countries with low levels of employment of nationals and the fragmentation of labor markets between national and foreign workers (Ulrichsen, 2015). Over the last 15–20 years, the nationalization of the workforce has been a widespread trend throughout GCC countries (Budhwar *et al*., 2019). Workforce nationalization policies aim to improve socioeconomic security and inclusion within GCC societies and seek to make these economies more resilient to external shocks ([Waxin *et al*., 2018](#_ENREF_10); [Zerovec and Bontenbal, 2011](#_ENREF_12)).

From the perspective of the state, the fundamental aim of nationalization is to reduce the dependence on foreign labor (Al-Aali and Rees, 2016), provide training and development for nationals to develop the state’s human capital (Abu-Shawish *et al*., 2021), impose employment quotas for nationals, and provide incentives to public and private sector organizations to encourage the employment of nationals. When using a quota system, employers are required to hire a specific minimum percentage of nationals (Elbanna and Fatima, 2022). However, the main critical concern with quota-based nationalization policies is the trade-off it imposes between the benefits to nationals and the costs to other workers and private sector businesses (Peck, 2017).

The GCC countries also aim to develop their citizens’ skills and competencies in a range of areas to diversify their economies away from the traditional industries of oil and gas. By nationalizing the labor force and using oil revenues to create jobs and wealth for citizens, GCC states undergird the social contract and improve political cohesiveness (Fargues, 2011). However, creating more job opportunities collides with the severe national workforce shortages, making the states increasingly dependent on foreign workers (Zweiri and Qawasmi, 2021). Other impediments, such as non-market-driven education systems and a culture that values prestige over performance (Williams *et al*., 2011) and wage disparities between nationals and foreign workers (Al-Farhan and Al-Busaidi, 2017), act as barriers to the success of workforce nationalization initiatives. Calls have emerged for direct intervention in the labor market to boost nationals’ employment in the private sector (Al-Asfour et al., 2022; Haak-Saheem, 2020).

In Qatar, the workforce nationalization (i.e., Qatarization) entails a transition away from excessive reliance on foreign workers in favor of creating a “competent Qatari workforce through education and training” (Hukoomi, 2020). It is synonymous with the Qatari government’s goal of providing permanent employment to its citizens in the public and private sectors. Rather than depending on foreign workers, Qatarization aims to nationalize the workforce to support the country’s human development strategies. The strategic Qatarization plan aimed for at least 50% of Qataris to play an integral role in the gas, energy, and oil industries (Constant *et al*., 2015). However, achieving the threshold target for the involvement of nationals has also been challenging. These challenges have arisen for various reasons, including the limited number of the national labor force, the perceived low prestige and stability of the jobs in some sectors, social barriers to females undertaking certain jobs, rapid staff turnover in the private sector, and the difficulties of organizations outside of large oil and gas companies to provide opportunities (Alsuwaidi, 2020). Barbar (2015) suggested that empirical evidence related to workforce nationalization in Qatar indicates that the initiative is still currently a “half-hearted effort” that has only enjoyed “limited success” in the context of the private sector. Exploring the point of view of local job seekers and employees—key stakeholders the strategy aims to integrate into the workforce, particularly in the private sector can enhance our understanding of the underlying reasons behind Qatarization’s limited success. Table 1 summarizes the results of a sample of relevant literature on workforce nationalization in the Gulf region.

<Table 1 about here>

*Attitude toward workforce nationalization*

The integration of nationals into the local labor market is a significant socioeconomic challenge that GCC countries currently encounter (Alsamara, 2022). Although workforcenationalization is perceived as an interventionist policy to protect national human capital (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020), it has recently been described as an ineffective mechanism (Elbanna, 2021) that has lead public and private organizations to become isomorphic structures with superficial management that attempts to comply with artificial legislations, as evidenced by studies conducted in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman, to list few (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020).

A social contract was forged in GCC countries at the beginning of the oil era (Patrick, 2009). One of the most critical aspects of the social contract is public sector employment: a promise for jobs that paid well above market rates and required far less than private sector qualifications and performance (Mellahi, 2007). This promise of social and economic security is unsustainable, as only a limited number of jobs are ever likely to be available in government departments and oil companies. Across the GCC countries, public sector wages already represent a considerable strain on the budget (Alsamara, 2022). Consequently, a set of beliefs underpin nationals’ perceptions about workforce nationalization. First, it is perceived as a means to replace expatriate workers with nationals to enhance the nation’s human capital and economic growth. Nationals in the GCC context consider economic progress and national human capital development as two sides of the same coin (Al Asfour and Khan, 2014). Unfortunately, this view has been ascertained by scant empirical research in the GCC context. For example, Berrabi *et al.*’s (2009) study in Qatar ascertained the positive relationship between workforce nationalization and Qatar’s human development index despite concerns about human resource development practices. In the UAE, Forstenlechner and Mellahi (2011) highlighted the significance of workforce nationalization on multinationals’ legitimacy and their subsequent economic growth in GCC markets.

Second, concerns remain about the effective implementation of workforce nationalization. The concerns anchor around, first, an inefficient quota system as the primary tool to enforce the enacted rules and regulations and the significant cost due to the overpayment of locals (Alfarhan and Al-Busaidi, 2018). Second, the strict cultural practices inhibit the effective implementation of workforce nationalization policies. Nationals represent the minority of employees and are mainly employed in the public sector in senior management roles to protect their privileged positions in the local community (Piccoli *et al*., 2017). Incorrect interpretations of the social contract have led to nationals’ reluctance to accept employment in the private sector (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020) and in other specific sectors. Another relevant consideration is that, despite the established consensus that females should constitute an integral aspect of the national’s human development plan, explicit stereotypes remain with regard to national females’ recruitment and career development (Belwal *et al*., 2019). Lastly, the ineffective/deficient education system in GCC countries produces graduates who lack the necessary employability skills (Waxin *et al*., 2018). Accordingly, unemployment among nationals began to grow, which was a phenomenon unheard of in the past and raised a wide criticism of the lack of a well-educated and trained national workforce to replace expatriates in many occupations (Albejaidi and Nair, 2019; Jabeen *et al*., 2018).

**Methodology**

*Research approach*

Given the exploratory nature of the research and the dearth of published studies on workforce nationalization from the job seekers’ perspective, a qualitative research approach was deemed necessary and appropriate for this study (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding for under-researched phenomena and enables the researcher to unpack previously unknown facets of a phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2003). To study workforce nationalization from the job seekers’ perspective, Qatar is considered a revelatory context for several reasons. First, the workforce nationalization strategy has risen to the top of the priority list and represents a vital component of the State National Vision 2030. Second, the country has made evident efforts to use its financial surpluses to create jobs and wealth for citizens. Third, Qatar launched several national initiatives to develop citizens’ skills and competencies in order to diversify their economies away from the traditional oil and gas industries. Fourth, research is lacking on how job seekers perceive the workforce nationalization strategy and whether they view it with the same lens as promoted by the government. Finally, there is limited conceptual and empirical research on national job seekers’ career expectations and career choice behaviors in Qatar.

*Interviews*

The themes discussed in the findings section were inductively derived from data obtained through 28 in-depth interviews with Qatari job seekers who were either unemployed or employed but seeking another job at the time of the interview. A purposive sampling approach was adopted to recruit informants knowledgeable about Qatarization who were in the process of searching for a new job. The research team used their social and professional networks to recruit participants, who were also asked to nominate other potential participants. The sample size was not decided a priori. In inductive and theory building research, the sample size is determined based on the saturation criterion; thus, we stopped the interviews when it became apparent that no additional data, new themes, or new ideas emerged in new interviews (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Instead, similar instances and stories were observed over and over again (Strauss and Corbin, 2014). According to the conceptual depth criteria suggested by Nelson (2016), saturation was achieved because (1) a wide range of evidence was drawn from the interview data to illustrate the identified themes, (2) there were connections between concepts and themes identified in the data, (3) the richness of the themes’ meaning was articulated, (4) the themes showed resonance with extant literature, and (5) the validity of findings was established as indicated below. Informants who participated in this study came from a range of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample (both male and female, mostly in their 20s and 30s, with different levels of education, and unemployed or working in different professions). All references to informants are pseudonymized. Interviews took place over a period of four months and lasted between 40 and 97 minutes, with an average interview duration of 66 minutes.

<Table 2 about here>

The interview questions were designed to elicit discussions with informants to answer the two research questions and cover the discussion themes as thoroughly as possible. Before conducting the interviews, the researchers developed an interview guide outlining the key discussion themes based on previous literature on workforce nationalization literature in GCC countries and the two research questions. Pilot interviews with two local job seekers were then conducted before the full-scale data collection was launched to confirm the relevancy and appropriateness of the interview questions (Malodia *et al*., 2021). Table 3 outlines the research questions and the corresponding interview questions. We employed a semi-structured format to allow the researcher to grasp the informants’ views while maintaining some degree of control to discuss certain predetermined topics. However, the interview guide was not followed with rigidity; rather, it was revised several times based on the themes and ideas that emerged during the interviews (Kelemen and Papasolomou, 2007). In addition, the semi-structured format helped us ensure that the questions were not biased toward predetermined theoretical or conceptual perspectives (Eisenhardt, 1989). The interview started with an initial question for participants to describe the meaning of Qatarization. The discussion then explored informants’ attitudes toward employment (e.g., the type of organization they wish to join/work in, the key factors that should exist in a job/organization to accept a job offer, the factors that make them unwilling to work in specific jobs or work environments). The interviewer used probing to encourage participants to describe their reasoning and further explore their views. For example, several follow-up questions were asked after the first question (i.e., “What does Qatarization mean to you?”) to clarify participants’ responses about their perception of Qatarization. Interviews were voice-recorded in order to maintain the natural and in-depth format of the data. To maintain the flow of the conversation, we advised informants to use the language they felt comfortable with when they answered the interview questions. Thus, most interview conversations were held in Arabic, with some English dialogue. The interviews were transcribed and then translated into English.

<Table 3 about here>

*Data analysis*

Following Gioia *et al*.’s (2013) and Neuman’s (2011) suggestions, the researchers proceeded to the data analysis by reading and re-reading all the interviews’ transcripts as the fundamental text from which thematic content analysis was conducted. NVivo12 software was employed for organizing, coding, and analyzing the data. Four steps were followed to complete the thematic analysis. First, all interviewees’ answers and comments irrelevant to the research topic were eliminated. For example, when answering the interview question about the key factors that should exist in a job/organization to accept a job offer, some participants discussed irrelevant topics such as the impact of expatriates on locals’ employability, critiques or praise for the government’s workforce nationalization initiatives, and organizations’ practices of implementing Qatarization. Although such topics were insightful for understanding the context in which Qatarization was implemented, they were eliminated so the research focused exclusively on the theme-related text. Second, the first author developed a coding scheme with an initial set of several codes based on multiple readings of the transcripts (Campbell *et al*., 2013; Jabeen, 2022; Malodia *et al*., 2021). The fourth author then reviewed the coding scheme to identify confusion and possible inconsistencies (Campbell *et al*., 2013). Moreover, the first and fourth authors held several discussions to review the coding scheme to ensure that the identified codes represent the interview data (Campbell *et al.*, 2013). We adjusted the coding scheme as necessary, and the revised codes were thought to represent the prevalent themes in the transcripts—namely, how local job seekers and employees perceive Qatarization, preferable workplace, job-attraction factors, job-discouraging factors, preferable work sector, and sector-related attraction/discouraging factors. The coding scheme was employed to work through all interview transcripts and mark the relevant interview excerpts corresponding to the codes. Third, as we progressed with the reading and analysis of the transcripts, codes were categorized in clusters, which were labeled based on the meaning or the relationships shared among the codes (Boyatzis, 1998; Spiggle, 1994). For example, the identified codes were grouped into two higher-order clusters: perception of Qatarization and nationals’ attitude toward employment. Fourth, an iterative back-and-forth process was adopted to interpret the interview data (Thompson *et al*., 1990). During this process, each transcript was considered as a whole, and each passage of the transcript was related to its overall content. In addition, several thorough discussions of interview data were conducted by the first and fourth authors to reach an agreement with respect to the interpretation of informants’ accounts.

# *Methodological rigor and validity of findings*

The authors employed four measures to ensure the methodological rigor of the qualitative research process employed in this study and its findings. First, an audit trail was established (Tracy, 2010) by reporting all methodological choices and providing a rationalization for the appropriateness of these choices to answer the research questions (e.g., using semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling, and thematic analysis). Second, efforts were made to ensure the suitability of the adopted sampling strategy to enable the authors to yield rigorous outcomes. A purposive sampling approach was employed to recruit participants based on three criteria relevant to the main research enquiry (Teddlie and Yu, 2007): being a Qatari national, knowledgeable about Qatarization, and in the process of searching for a new job. In addition, we ensured diversity among informants (both males and females, mostly in their 20s and 30s, with different levels of education, and unemployed or working in different professions).

Third, the credibility of findings was established by adopting rigorous and appropriate analytical procedures (Pollio *et al*., 1997). Analytical procedures for this study were thought to yield plausible interpretations of informants’ accounts (there is a relationship between the interpretation and data) and be illuminating (providing new themes and a fresh understanding of informants’ experts). Fourth, the themes presented in the findings section adopt an emic perspective (i.e., using informants’ terms, rather than the researchers’) to describe the perceptual stands for local job seekers and employees rather than using predetermined conceptually abstract terms (Thompson *et al*., 1990). However, we recognize that the themes presented in the findings section should be viewed as perceptual accounts offered by interview data that evolved in a specific context and were subjected to a continuous hermeneutic process (Pollio *et al*., 1997).

**Findings**

In analyzing the ways in which Qatari job seekers and employees perceive the Qatarization strategy, as well as the language they use to depict their understanding of the national strategy, two central themes emerged: perception of Qatarization among Qatari job seekers and employees and nationals’ attitudes toward employment. Within each of these themes, a further set of sub-themes were identified.

*Perception of Qatarization*

Based on the thematic analysis, we identified word frequencies and related topics discussed by participants when describing the Qatarization strategy. Figure 1 depicts the keywords frequently used by nationals to characterize their perceptions of Qatarization. At its most fundamental level, Qatarization is perceived as a strategy that prioritizes the replacement of the foreign labor force with Qataris to reduce the country’s dependency on expatriate labor, particularly in the public sector.



Figure 1: Perception of Qatarization Word Frequency

To further unpack the context in which participants mentioned some keywords, a text search query for three emergent keywords was conducted: Qataris, foreign, and sector. Figure 2 depicts the context in which nationals used emerging keywords to characterize their perceptions of Qatarization. Participants used terms such as “suitable jobs in governmental institutions,” “appointment in leadership positions,” “reduce unemployment,” and “recruiting in the private sector” to highlight their perception of the emphasis of the strategy toward the national workforce. On the contrary, when they mention foreign labor force, exclusionary terminology such as “reduce dependence,” “replace,” and “reduce” the number of foreign employees was used as a main priority for the strategy. In terms of the sector in which the strategy seeks to hire nationals, although some participants believed the strategy aims to integrate nationals into all sectors, the majority viewed it as a means of facilitating national recruitment and increasing their employability in the public sector.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

Figure 2: Text search query for Qatarization related Keywords

The analysis of participants’ responses to what constitutes Qatarization provides insights into two emergent sub-themes: prioritize the employment of nationals and the waithood phenomenon. Although Qatarization is intended to be a multifaceted strategy aimed at reducing reliance on foreign labor by developing a competent national workforce through education and training **(**Rutledge *et al*., 2011), the general perception among participants was that the strategy aims to replace foreign workers in leadership positions, particularly in the public sector. For instance, Yousef described Qatarization as:

*A policy that emphasizes the recruitment of Qataris, rather than foreign workers, in key positions in the country. It acts as a replacement strategy, particularly in high positions in governmental institutions.*

Indeed, the eventual proclivity toward public sector employment is consistent with previous research on general job conceptions held by nationals. For instance, a study conducted on 300 prospective job-seeking nationals discovered that government and semi-government entities came out on top when respondents were asked to rank their ideal workplace (Benchiba-Savenius *et al*., 2016). Nationals’ overall impression of the emphasis of the strategy to secure roles and positions in the public sector was stronger than that in the private sector. For example, Salma stated:

*Qatarization is the appointment of nationals in leadership positions that suit them, implying a reduction in the reliance on foreign employees, particularly in governmental organizations.*

Favorability toward the public sector is evidenced in many responses as presented in Figure 2. Such perceptions frequently result in the waithood phenomenon, which Bunglawala (2011)defined as a condition in which a national may choose to remain unemployed upon graduation with the anticipation of securing employment in the public sector rather than risk taking a lower-paying unsuitable job in the private sector. Waithood, from a national’s perspective, presents a prospect of stable work in the public sector with numerous benefits.

It is unsurprising that some citizens compare Qatarization to preferential hiring, which fosters an entitlement mentality among nationals. Responses related to the keyword *Qataris* in Figure 2 highlight how one of the unintended outcomes of Qatarization is the reinforcement of feelings of entitlement. Indeed, guaranteed employment in leadership roles may not necessarily foster productivity. For instance, Alanoud explained:

*While Qatarization intends to provide opportunities for nationals, it has the unintended consequence of impeding productivity among newly employed youth, who mistake priority to entitlement.*

This sense of entitlement among job seekers is likely to drive them into waithood and cause those already there to endure extended periods of unemployment while looking for a suitable job. What makes this sense more problematic in the workplace is that entitlement has a negative influence on employee engagement (Joplin *et al*., 2021), and individuals who hold such a sense lack altruism and team spirit, impeding collective production.

*Nationals’ attitude toward employment*

In analyzing the perceptions of Qatari job seekers, this research identified several factors that influence national job seekers’ employment choices. Those factors are discussed next in two sub-themes.

*Job-attraction factors*

The interview data revealed that reasonable working hours that allow for a healthy work–life balance play a key role in attracting and recruiting national job seekers in Qatar. Research indicates that the public sector in GCC tends to employ a greater percentage of female employees when compared to the private sector due to shorter working hours that allow employees to leave midday to pick up their children from school (AlDhaheri et al., 2017; Economic Intelligence Unit, 2009). This is reflected in several comments gathered from interviews, which indicated that national job seekers perceive the public sector to have reasonable working hours. For instance, Salma identified the key attraction factor:

*The primary aspect influencing my employment decision is the number of working hours required to maintain a healthy work–life balance. I would consider working for a company that promotes employee well-being based on the number of hours people are expected to work while also considering changing life situations such as pregnancy and family emergencies.*

Although there are numerous attraction and retention strategies aimed at increasing employee satisfaction, organizational loyalty, and – ultimately – long-term engagement, perhaps the most contentious issue surrounding workforce nationalization and the push toward private sector adoption is job security. Interestingly, according to a study on human resource practices that affect an employee’s level of job satisfaction, senior public sector employees believe that job security is a critical component in determining whether an individual will stay in or leave a position (Mehrez and Bakri, 2018).Moreover, job security repeatedly emerged in participants’ narratives as a stimulus to select a career path. For instance, Yousef explained:

*Regardless of the sector in which an organization operates, my main concern is job security and stability, followed by professional development, followed by compensation.*

Perhaps one of the most intriguing perspectives on attraction and retention factors expressed by multiple participants is an organization’s capacity to establish explicit policies and procedures related to employee termination. It is possible that employee termination practices that equate ineffectiveness to layoffs impede employee attractiveness and retention. Nonetheless, one would expect termination-related concerns to function as a deterrent to employment rather than an attraction factor. Furthermore, the compensation that job seekers and employees anticipate motivates them to perform at their best (Yousaf *et al*., 2014). Financial and non-financial remunerations are critical in attracting and retaining employees within an organization.

The interview data revealed some similarities and differences concerning the attraction factors among male and female national job seekers. Table 4 outlines the most frequently reported attraction factors for males and females. Although both male and female national job seekers identified financial compensation, working hours, and job security as attraction factors, their perceptions of these factors varied. For instance, female national job seekers expressed a clear vision of the type of job security they were seeking while underscoring the clear link to the factors to employment termination. On the other hand, male national job seekers related the job security factor to stability at work. In terms of dissimilarities, although male national job seekers valued teamwork and well-defined job descriptions, their female counterparts valued professional development opportunities and preferred to work in companies that consider cultural implications at the workplace.

<Table 4 about here>

*Job-discouraging factors*

The unpredictable nature of the work environment undermines the concept of a conventional career within an organization in favor of a protean career mindset (Cortellazzo *et al*., 2020). In describing the concept of a protean career, Hall (2004) argued that identity, which he used synonymously with self-awareness and self-concept, plays a critical role in an individual’s given career choice and path. Similarly, Chin and Rasdi (2014) claimed that, in a new trend underscored by protean careers, job seekers and employees are increasingly motivated to construct their career paths. In keeping with the identity aspect of the protean career, in the current study cultural beliefs about gender roles functioned as a discouraging factor. For instance, Abdullah explained:

*I may decline a job offer where the work atmosphere allows for male–female mixing.*

Interestingly, although females may be expected to experience more gender-related discomfort than males, this was not the case in this study. However, what is intriguing is that individual job seekers regarded gender mixing as a deterrent significant enough to justify refusing a job opportunity. Literature on workplace leadership in the GCC countries has frequently mirrored a historic predisposition that views leadership as a male domain (Sikdar and Mitra, 2012). However, in this case, discomfort associated with working in mixed-gender workplaces is cultural in nature and not a result of the proverbial glass ceiling phenomenon, particularly because female participants regarded organizations with disproportionate male-to-female ratios as discouraging. For instance, Nora stated:

*I will not work in an environment where male employees outnumber female employees.*

This study also demonstrated that nationals found the prospect of working in an environment dominated by foreign workers discouraging. Ironically, such a concept creates a catch-22 situation, as the majority of Qatar’s working population is made up of foreign workers, making Qatari nationals a minority in both the private and public sectors. For instance, Sarah explained:

*I will decline a job offer if the proportion of Qataris employed by the prospective institution is extremely low compared to other nationalities.*

Evidently, there are underlying mismatches between what a job seeker needs and what Qatarization offers. Noticeably, a sense of belonging in the workplace is critical for job seekers who find it challenging to embrace a multiculturalist mindset. Sentiments of separation endorsement from foreign workers act as a hindrance to employment. This study also discovered that nationals regard the lack of transparency in career progression and promotion opportunities as a discouraging factor. For example, Mubarak explained:

*I will decline a job offer if a company’s promotion policies are ambiguous and I am unsure that I will receive the promotions I deserve.*

The transparency of promotion policies is often considered a post-hiring factor influencing employees’ propensity to stay or leave work. However, in this study, this factor was found to be a pre-hiring factor in attracting/discouraging national job seekers to accept or reject a job offer. From an organizational standpoint, and based on the Peter Principle, it is natural to assume that managers of individual organizations are aware that the skills necessary for success at one level of employment do not always translate to success at the next, making it difficult for businesses to reward high performance (Wagner, 2018). As such, Benson *et al*. (2019) argued that companies who promote employees based on their current performance may risk employing ineffective managers. Therefore, it is unsurprising that companies may choose not to explicitly disclose their promotion policies during the hiring process. However, this lack of transparency should not discourage national job seekers from accepting an offer that ticks the rest of their requirements.

The interview data revealed similarities and differences concerning the discouraging factors among male and female national job seekers. Table 5 summarizes the most frequently reported discouraging factors for males and females. Although some factors were similar among male and female demographics, the rationale behind the factors were diverse. For instance, while the separation mindset influences both male and female national job seekers’ rejection of a job opportunity, the pendulum of reasoning swings along a continuum. For males, integration with other cultures’ working styles seems to be the challenge whereas, for females, general separation from other cultures is highly preferred. In addition, inconsistencies exist in terms of factors that affect male and female national job seekers. For example, whereas male nationals highlighted the lack of promotions as a discouraging factor, their female counterparts did not. Meanwhile, religious beliefs appeared to function as a discouraging factor for females.

<Table 5 about here>

**Conclusion and implications**

*Conclusions*

In addition to adding to the limited literature on workforce nationalization in the GCC countries, this study sheds some much-needed light on how GCC job seekers and employees perceive the nationalization strategy and explore the underlying attitudes and beliefs that shape their career expectations and choices. The study enquired about the views of Qatari job seekers voicing their perception of workforce nationalization and employment. Two fundamental themes emerged from the thematic analysis of 28 interviewees’ data: perception of Qatarization and nationals’ attitudes toward employment. First, local job seekers perceived Qatarization as a means to replace expatriate employees, particularly in the public sector and leadership positions. This perception reflects GCC citizens’ common understanding of the social contract as a commitment of their governments to guarantee their employment and provide them with secure and well-paid public jobs in exchange for their loyalty (Alfarhan and Al-Busaidi, 2018; Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010). Contrary to the state-proclaimed goal of creating a “competent Qatari workforce through education and training” (Hukoomi, 2020), this situation shows an improper interpretation of the nationalization strategy and leads to several complications, such as heavy reliance on expatriate workers in the private sector and inefficient and overstaffed public organizations (Elbanna *et al.*, 2020; Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020).

Participants’ current perception of Qatarization revealed favorability toward employment in the public sector, leading to the waithood phenomenon. As a result of this phenomenon, nationals’ expectations for compensation and working conditions increase while their knowledge of employment prospects in the private sector decreases. Although higher pay for nationals may be justified if accompanied by increased productivity, there is a dearth of relevant literature on productivity differentials between nationals and foreign workers in GCC countries. In the case of the national job seekers in Qatar who participated in this study, their preconceived notions about the private sector demotivated them even before they had the opportunity to give it a try. If waithood were a coin, the reverse side would depict a safety net. Although many developed countries provide unemployment benefits to their nationals, Shediac and Samman (2010) argued that GCC countries have had little incentive to build social safety nets for the unemployed given the implicit and unspoken guarantee of a job in the public sector. Arguably, the unspoken guarantee in this scenario acts as a safety net, clouding job seekers’ perceptions of the workforce nationalization as a protective mechanism that allows them to freefall into the net. A shift in perspective in viewing the safety net as a safety trampoline can provide the much-needed balance necessary to properly implement the workforce nationalization strategy. By viewing workforce nationalization as a safety trampoline, job seekers may come to perceive educational training programs, quotas, and incentives as a means of assisting them to bounce back and grasp better employment opportunities.

Drawing on these findings, there is a need to educate locals and alter their thinking with respect to replacing foreign workers after having acquired the professional skills previously showcased by expatriate workers. This is essential to reduce the stereotypical beliefs of others toward GCC national employees in general, who are characterized as unambitious and lazy employees with a poor work ethic and a lack of commitment (Mellahi, 2007; Rees *et al.*, 2007). These stereotypes are often linked with the lagging education system in the region. For example, several studies have pointed out the need for a better education system to improve ethical standards, produce a skilled workforce, and enable a higher degree of synergy between the labor market requirements and university curriculum (Elbanna *et al*., 2020; Jabeen *et al*., 2018; Williams *et al.*, 2011).

Second, our analysis identified two sub-themes associated with nationals’ attitudes toward employment. The first sub-theme is job-attraction factors, which included, for example, reasonable working hours, particularly for women to help maintain a balance between their work and family responsibilities. Two other important factors are job security and compensation, which also attract local employees who prefer working in the public sector. The second sub-theme is job-discouraging factors, which include cultural beliefs about gender roles or male–female mixing and working in an environment dominated by foreign workers. Other discouraging factors are the lack of transparent career progression and promotion opportunities. Adequate education, training, and development strategies at the national level can help overcome the perceived discouraging factors. Such strategies will directly or indirectly aid in resisting religious and cultural stereotypes regarding female representation in the workforce, mixed environments, and dominance of foreign workers (Albejaidi and Nair, 2019; Rutledge *et al.*, 2011).

Based on the findings of this study, future research could provide empirical evidence to support the research propositions summarized in Table 6.

<Table 6 about here>

*Policy implications*

This study highlights several implications for managers and policymakers for each of the two identified themes discussed in the findings section. First, there is a wide sense of entitlement among locals toward positions in the public sector, particularly leadership roles. Hence, there is a need to rectify this common negative understanding of nationalization as discussed below. Otherwise, locals’ preference for jobs in the public sector will leave them unmotivated or unemployed rather than taking up a challenging position in the private sector (Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2010; Belwal *et al*., 2019).

Second, although the focus in the last few decades has been to embark on a policy aimed at creating job opportunities for nationals through the enforcement of employment quota policies (Peck, 2017), the attention now should be shifted toward creating mechanisms to develop the capabilities of the GCC local workforce and providing a remedy to the negative perceptions identified in the data, such as those factors associated with working hours, employee termination, productivity, work ethic, commitment, cultural beliefs, and working conditions. In this regard, education, training and national development strategies can help overcome the current damaging attitudes of nationals toward employment.

Third, policymakers need to consider that the social contract in the region can be questioned in terms of altering locals’ perception that they are entitled to a secured job irrespective of their competencies. Further work on managing locals’ perception regarding the associations between job opportunities and their competencies is needed from policymakers’ side as well. Such efforts should be accompanied with public media campaigns to help local employees realize the fact that nationalization strategies should aim to develop the human capital and encourage nationals to accept a wider range of jobs in both public and private sector organizations. In doing so, policymakers need to take into account the interesting results of this study associated with how male and female job seekers similarly (e.g., working hours, job security, separation mindset) or differently (e.g., teamwork, professional development, promotion opportunities, religious beliefs) perceive job attraction and discouraging factors.

*Limitations and future research*

Although this study contributes to filling the knowledge gap in the workforce nationalization literature, it has a number of limitations, which offer avenues for future research. First, researchers could benefit from investigating large samples and conducting a multivariate analysis to empirically examine the ideas discussed in this study. Second, our sample focused only on job seekers and employees, and it would be interesting to explore the views of other stakeholders, including policymakers, managers, and expatriate employees. Third, this study focuses on Qatar; researchers might extend this study to conduct a comparative analysis across GCC countries.

In addition to addressing these limitations, this study raises other questions that provide more avenues for future research. For example, it would appear to be a great potential to assess how practices of the quota system in the GCC countries, over the last four decades, have contributed to the current perception of the nationalization strategy. Second, although our study revealed some similarities and differences concerning both attraction and discouraging factors among male and female national job seekers, future research could further examine these factors to better understand them and show how they influence the development and employment of both genders. Third, there is a need to examine the existing social contract in the GCC countries and propose how it can be developed to contribute to correcting the wrong perception of workforce nationalization and consequently enhance the implementation of the nationalization strategy.

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