

# Our Knowledge Safeguards our Jobs and We're not Sharing! Knowledge Withholding Experiences of Emirati Private Sector Employees

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**Abstract:** Since the beginning of its rapid development following the oil boom of the 1960s, the United Arab Emirates has relied heavily on imported labour, largely from low GDP countries. This has resulted in a massive workforce imbalance with currently only about 4% of citizens in the private sector and 60% in the public sector. To address this, the government has implemented workforce localisation policies which provide better conditions, including greater job security, to citizens than to expatriates. Many expatriates perceive the presence of Emirati workers in their organisation as a direct threat to their own employment security. Research has demonstrated that this leads to Emiratis experiencing discriminatory behaviour. This qualitative study gathered data through narrative interviews with 16 Emirati private sector employees conducted to probe their experience of knowledge sharing within their organisations. The dominant themes that emerged from analysis of this data were 1) outgroup identity marking of Emirati employees; 2) purposeful knowledge withholding on the part of expatriate colleagues. Exclusion from knowledge sharing practices were accounted for by participants as due to the perception of employees from low GDP countries that Emiratis enjoy exceptional privilege because of their citizenship of a high GDP country. The implication of these findings is that exclusion from knowledge sharing exerts substantial restriction on the successful integration of citizens within the country's heavily expatriate dominated labour force. This study's contribution is its demonstration of citizenship and job security status as moderators of knowledge sharing practices in multicultural workforces.

**Keywords:** Emiratisation, Job Security, Knowledge Sharing, Multinational Workforces, Nationality Clusters, United Arab Emirates

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## 1. Introduction

This study was conducted in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), an affluent, politically stable country in the Arabian Gulf, which hosts a massive expatriate population. Given much anecdotal evidence on information withholding from Emirati employees by their expatriate colleagues and limited academic research (Al-Ali, 2008; Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2010, 2012; Goby et al., 2015; Goby et al., 2017), it aimed to provide further empirical evidence on this issue. It explores the complex and challenging relationships between the small number of institutionally privileged local workers and the massive majority of expatriate employees who are substantially unprotected from profit-based corporate decisions regarding salary, work conditions, and job security. This chasm between the entitlements of local versus expatriate employees results in exclusionary tactics on the part of expatriates which frequently manifests in a refusal to assist their Emirati colleagues' integration into the organisation. A key tactic in this is denying their access to common information-sharing practices.

This study provides a theoretical contribution by its demonstration of citizenship and job security status as moderators of knowledge sharing practices in multicultural workforces and its analysis of the cultural variables dominant in the UAE which impact attitudes to organisational knowledge sharing. Its practical contribution lies in its identification of specific barriers to workforce localisation which can provide a guide to policymakers concerned with Emiratisation and the development of managerial strategies to reduce the gap between what local employees expect versus what they find in the country's private sector workforce.

The paper begins with an overview of the UAE labour force followed by a discussion of relevant literature. It then describes the methodology used, data collection, analysis, and results. It concludes with a discussion of the findings and limitations of the study.

## 2. UAE Labour Market and Workforce Localisation

The population of the UAE is currently around 10 million, but only 12% is local, and 88%, expatriate (Infographics, 2024). This demographic composition stems from the country's need for skilled labour which emerged during the oil boom of the 1960s when the population was only 90,000 and predominantly unskilled (Lahmeyer, 2001). To develop infrastructures funded by oil revenues, the UAE recruited vast numbers of expatriate workers across all skills levels who were attracted by the higher salaries on offer (Rees et al., 2007). UAE legislation facilitates the influx of foreign workers, making it an attractive destination for multinational corporations seeking to

participate in post-oil boom economic diversification. The country has emerged as a significant economic hub, ranking 12th of the 141 countries survey in the 2019 *Global Competitiveness Report* for quality of infrastructure, 15th for institutions, and second for ICT adoption. For diversity of workforce, it ranks second after Singapore, fifth for ease of hiring foreign labour, and 116<sup>th</sup> for workers' rights (Schwab, 2019).

The workforce in the UAE reflects the population imbalance, with the private sector comprising only 4% Emiratis (PWC, 2024). The primary reason for this phenomenon stems from organisations' continued preference for expatriate employees. These individuals typically have modest salary expectations shaped by significantly lower salary scales in their home countries (Goby, 2015). Moreover, their employment can be more easily terminated (Kerr and England, 2009).

To facilitate Emiratis' entry into the private sector and to promote the socioeconomic benefits of a stable, indigenous workforce (Sarker and Rahman, 2020), the government has implemented Emiratisation policies since the 1990s, aiming to increase Emirati representation in the private sector through training, incentives, and quotas (Elbanna, 2022; Zeffane and Kemp, 2020). Under these regulations, Emirati employees enjoy considerably more work-related rights and job security than expatriates. This contributes to greater inequality between the two groups, and expatriate workers often feel threatened by Emiratisation and losing their jobs means being legally required to leave the country, all of which contributes to work dissatisfaction (Ali et al, 2020). Additionally, the private sector's "hire and fire at will" culture further undermines expatriates' job security (Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2012, p. 621). Despite rapidly rising educational levels among citizens, a broad range of training schemes, incentives, and other initiatives, the Emiratisation policies have had limited success (Al Jawali et al., 2021).

### 3. Literature Review

Recent research has explored knowledge management and cultural context (Liu et al., 2022), the connection between knowledge management technologies and national culture (Liu et al., 2023), and the relationship between organisational learning and performance as facilitated by knowledge sharing within specific economic and cultural contexts (Liu et al., 2024). The importance of national culture in relation to knowledge management and transfer necessitates an account of cultural traits of the UAE context most especially those variables that have a strong impact on how communication is conducted. To demonstrate how Emirati culture shapes communication and perception, we can refer to Hofstede's influential framework for cultural analysis. According to Hofstede (2011), the UAE exhibits high power distance (90/100), indicating strongly hierarchical tendencies. It also demonstrates high uncertainty avoidance (80/100), suggesting a preference for risk aversion and rule-based approaches to minimise uncertainty. As a result of these cultural propensities, Emiratis will typically seek validation from their superiors to ensure clarity in work-related expectations. The culture also exhibits a prominently collectivist orientation, scoring a low 25/100 on the dimension of individualism, indicating Emiratis' disposition to prioritise group needs. Central to this collectivist ethos is the significance placed on face, defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman, 1955, p. 213). Although face is recognised as a universal construct (Zane and Yeh, 2002), its prominence is more marked in collectivist societies (Chan et al., 2009). Given these cultural tendencies, Emiratis are more comfortable with a group-oriented approach to activities and are likely to strive to avoid conflicts and to identify collective needs before acting individually. The specific gap in the literature which this study addresses is the impact of national citizenship status on organisational knowledge sharing.

### 4. Study

Narrative research represents a person-centric approach to data gathering and analysis. It attempts to unravel the stories people tell about their own lives and how they make sense of these, and this allows the researcher to gather insight from these subjective interpretations. This investigation employs narrative methodology adopting an interpretivist approach and seeking to identify commonalities from the stories participants relate about their working worlds and their nuanced understanding of these experiences.

#### 4.1 Narrative Methodology

Narrative data inevitably involves a certain collaborative process between the narrator and the researcher, a fact which makes the role of reflexivity central in the investigation (Ozturk and Berber, 2022). The researcher minimised her impact (Gioia et al., 2013) by adopting an interview approach akin to a conversation. This tactic aimed to nurture a relationship built on trust (Dundon and Ryan, 2010) and to reduce any perceived distance

between the researcher and the participant (Essers, 2009). A conscious effort was made to avoid steering the conversation beyond introducing the issue of support or challenges encountered in the workplace. This approach aimed to create an environment in which participants felt comfortable enough to freely discuss experiences that held significance for them. Such an unstructured approach, through which participants had the freedom to share their personal narratives as they saw fit, justified considering these employees to be experts or “knowledgeable agents,” remaining faithful to their interpretation of reality, and prioritising it in the analysis of the interview data (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 17).

## 4.2 Data Collection

Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was used to identify participants. Snowball sampling, an approach which leverages on the interconnectedness of individuals, facilitated the recruitment of participants with sufficient experience to provide rich and valuable information. The researcher contacted Emiratis encountered in professional settings, requested their participation, and solicited their referrals to other Emiratis in the private sector. Emails were sent to these referred people inviting them to take part in the study. Interviews were conducted with a total of 16 Emiratis, nine men and seven women, aged between 22 and 45, all graduates, and three holding postgraduate degrees. The interviews took place in person at a venue of the participant’s choice. They were conducted in English and all participants had a high level of facility in English which was one of the selection criteria. Interviews lasted between one hour and an hour and a half, and an audio recording of each was made with the permission of the participant. These recordings were then transcribed.

## 4.3 Analysis

Thematic coding was used to analyse the interview transcripts. An Emirati research assistant was engaged for this stage of the study, and both she and the researcher independently conducted fine-grained readings of the transcripts. This collaboration allowed the comparison of the themes identified by each and the discussion, validation, or dismissal of each theme (Gibbert and Ruigrok, 2010; Silverman, 2005). This approach addressed the issue of reflexivity in research and helped mitigate the potential influence of a single researcher’s preconceptions regarding the analysis of the data (Ozturk and Berber, 2022, p. 220).

## 5. Findings

Given the rich data that emerged from these interviews, it was a challenge to make sense of this abundant material and identify significant patterns that could serve to construct a framework which would condense the data to specific issues that could guide both policy implications and the furtherance of this research stream (Patton, 1990). This dual aim was considered to be best met by a process of axial coding in which second order theoretical categories were inferred from the open codes and then amalgamated into aggregate theoretical dimensions (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). A process of constant comparison of statements led to the emergence of two overarching themes that can be stated as:

- Outgroup identity marking of Emirati employees
- Purposeful knowledge withholding on the part of expatriate colleagues

### 5.1 Outgroup Identity Marking of Emirati Employees

This dimension encapsulates a variety of perspectives all indicative of a sentiment of not being accepted as an integral part of the larger organisational body. The most frequent types of expressions relating to this perception include:

- Being assigned very basic duties, such as photocopying, despite holding high qualifications and job title.
- An abundance of strongly negative stereotypes of Emiratis. Participants reported a range of hostile comments that they frequently hear, such as “What the hell are they doing here?” “Why don’t they hang out in the coffee shop!” “They don’t need the money; their government takes care of them.”
- Sense of personal incompetence even though their qualifications are adequate.
- Sense of needing to work harder than expatriate colleagues to diminish the stereotype that Emiratis are lazy.
- Far greater occurrence of Emiratis being rejected and marginalised than being welcomed by immediate colleagues.

- Hostility was generally of an implicit nature although some expatriate employees were highly vocal in their criticism of Emiratis.
- Perception of acute jealousy on the part of many expatriate colleagues often expressed with the notion that Emiratis enjoy so many financial benefits that they do not need to work at all and have no right to be in the workplace.
- Perception that Emiratis enjoy an excessive degree of privilege because of their citizenship of a high GDP country.

Hostile stereotypes of Emiratis' work ethic, such as those that emerge in these findings, have been found to adversely impact their organisational socialisation and retention (Karam et al., 2023). Much of the negative stereotyping of Emirati employees was accounted for by one participant with the explanation that in the 1970s it was quite common for an Emirati to be appointed as a manager and then do no actual work. This is an example of legacy thinking from a period in which the country was very new, and its citizens were largely professionally unprepared and unaware of the requirements of their organisational role. Since those times, however, there has been an exponential advance in Emiratis' qualifications and professional readiness. The government provides free education for all citizens up to undergraduate level and has fully sponsored large numbers of citizens for undergraduate and postgraduate studies at well-ranked universities overseas. Moreover, many Emiratisation policies provide specific professional training. However, the stereotype remains a comfortable one for expatriates seeking to assert their own greater value to the organisation.

## 5.2 Purposeful Knowledge Withholding on the Part of Expatriate Colleagues

Most participants reported a chronic lack of access to vital information which makes it difficult or impossible to secure task-essential information and leads to a drop in their morale. Expressions of this perception include:

- Sense of feeling lost while observing expatriate colleagues appear to know exactly what they are to do. This isolation was expressed by one participant as "I'm not in the box."
- Existence of nationality clusters in which individuals engage in high degrees of exclusive knowledge sharing among people from their own country and which function easily through the use of their native language even in the presence of members of other language groups.
- Overt expressions by expatriate colleagues that, given Emiratis' high degree of job security, they did not need to be further privileged by inclusion in organisational knowledge sharing networks. "Let him find out by himself" is an example of a type of comment frequently overheard.
- Much experience of asking for advice on how to perform a new task and, rather than receiving an explanation, having an expatriate colleague complete the task. This insistence on doing rather than teaching was interpreted as a means to prevent Emirati recruits from learning on the job and developing their own skills.
- Difficulties experienced in ensuring the correct execution of their duties due to receiving inadequate information or guidance.
- Expatriate managers as well as employees withhold important information.
- Three participants mentioned that restrictions on knowledge sharing with Emirati employees also operate in the public sector.

## 6. Discussion

This investigation into a central component of the integration of citizens into the private sector, namely, their access to organisational information sharing networks, provides data which can help shape focussed policy to enhance the success of the workforce localisation initiatives. Its findings suggest a case of knowledge sharing being weaponised as a means to exclude the full integration of a particular population group, namely, citizens, by other groups, namely, non-citizens, as part of an attempt to safeguard job security. It highlights the role of national citizenship and cultural affinities within knowledge sharing domains. Through its exploration of the sociocultural issues involved in working relations between Emirati minority and expatriate majority employees, it reveals embedded, context-specific dynamics that need to be addressed in policy and training.

Due to their deeply ingrained collectivist values, Emiratis tend to gravitate to collaborative endeavours rather than individual efforts when approaching tasks and working towards organisational goals (Goby and Nickerson, 2011). This cultural propensity inclines Emirati employees to strive for integration within groups rather than enacting personal autonomy. The impact of this in relation to information sharing is that Emirati employees prefer to seek required information from individuals with whom they feel personally connected. The

prioritisation of group solidarity and the affordance of mutual assistance are robust behavioural norms within traditional UAE culture (Salzman, 2008). This deliberate fostering of good personal relationships is also demonstrated in Emiratis' behaviour to foreigners (Goby and Nickerson, 2015). Given this historically embedded behaviour, the absence of mutual support identified in this study can be particularly damaging for Emirati employees who view any reluctance on the part of colleagues to provide help as constituting workplace incivility, a practice which has been demonstrated to curtail professional development (Chen et al., 2012).

## 7. Managerial Implications

This study's findings imply a wilfully imposed sense of isolation which undoubtedly affects Emiratis' integration into their organisations and their retention outlook. This calls for managers to consider the development of specific accommodations for Emiratis to assist their integration into the organisation. There are many sociocultural issues impacting the satisfaction and retention intention of Emiratis in the private sector (Rutledge, 2023). While there are organisational socialisation policies and practices in relation to Emiratis in the private sector (Waxin et al., 2020), the exclusion that this study's participants report demonstrates the need to refine these. The specific area of information withholding experiences of Emirati employees might become a strategic action field in which the minutia of the experience of each Emirati employee is elicited and tracked and specific individual responses developed. The need for special accommodations for minority groups in the workforce is well documented and their absence can lead to rapid attrition (Greer and Wyant, 2024). In the UAE context, managers could consider accommodations such as assigning a mentor to each new Emirati recruit mandating the mentor to gather a full account of the employee's experience with specific employees in terms of knowledge sharing and withholding. This would identify precise problems and provide data for specific solutions to knowledge withholding and strategies for full access to the knowledge sharing networks necessary for Emirati integration and satisfaction in the workplace. Typically, the dynamics involved in affirmative action plans involve giving advantage to a minority group that has been historically disadvantaged. But in the case of the UAE, the minority is actually a powerful one whose disadvantage derives from its numerical inferiority. This accounts for the complexity of the Emiratisation aspirations and the obstacles Emirati employees experience in adjusting their individual selves to a complex and sometimes hostile work environment.

## 8. Limitations

This study did not seek to establish broadscale, generalisable findings that could apply in diverse geopolitical settings. Nonetheless, it has direct relevance for other Arabian Gulf countries which rely on a vast majority of expatriate labour and are also seeking to achieve adequate localisation of their workforces.

The fact that the study dealt with a sensitive socio-political issue could have impacted on the interview data (Alvesson, 2010, p. 37). The sensitive nature of the topic under investigation meant that the data collection had to be approached with caution. Negotiating access to participants with a clear understanding of the purpose of the research and the absolute anonymity of information shared meant that the sample was restricted to respondents who demonstrated willingness to discuss their experiences and opinions openly. This methodological decision resulted in a significant limitation of the size of the data pool, but it was considered essential to prioritise the likely authenticity of participant input over quantity.

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