

Cultural Dynamics of Intimacy in Airline Companies: A Case Study of Qatar Airways

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Abstract

Qatar Airways is an airline that has its head office in Doha and has various employees from various countries. This research raises cultural intimacy within airline organizations. The research method used is a qualitative research method with thematic analysis techniques. The informant determination technique in this study used a purposive sampling technique. The results of the study indicate that cultural intimacy within Qatar Airways requires additional training to maintain the existence of the airline's employee performance. The organizational culture that occurs within the company shows that all key informants can follow the organizational culture that exists within the company. Communication that occurs between employees from various countries shows the result that communication misunderstandings often occur due to cultural differences.

Keywords: *Culture, Cultural Intimacy, Airline, Organizational Culture, Thematic Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The advancements in technology and transportation have facilitated globalization, leading to a growing number of companies operating across national borders, such as Singapore Airlines, Thai Airways, Qantas Airways, British Airways, Garuda Indonesia, ANA Air, Eva Air, Malaysia Airlines, Emirates, United Airlines, Etihad Airways, Turkish Airlines, Japan Airlines, Korean Air, Cathay Pacific, KLM, and others. This trend has made it increasingly convenient for travelers to journey to tourist destinations located outside their home countries. Travelers utilizing airline services come from diverse cultural backgrounds representing various nations. As a result, employees from different cultures gather in one place, and it is imperative in the business world to have a clearer understanding of the influence of culture on organizational practices. In line with business globalization, individuals from one culture frequently interact with those from other cultures.

Organizational culture is a crucial factor for companies in determining their objectives. Within an organizational culture, it is undeniable that changes will occur - the expansion of organizational changes has led to a plethora of concepts, labels, and models. There is literature on aspects such as structure, culture, and strategy, the processes through which change is achieved, various internal and external forces presumed to trigger, accelerate, or hinder change, the scope and magnitude of change, implementation issues, and more (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2016).

Recognizing this, many global companies invest significant resources in training airline staff to effectively communicate with clients and colleagues from different national cultures. The expansion of travel routes is accompanied by an increase in the number of employees and crew required for airline operations. This expansion leads Qatar Airways to have a diverse range of qualifications to meet the company's needs, including based on diverse nationalities. Currently, Qatar Airways employs over 130,000 individuals of varying nationalities.

This will be the focus of the researcher, as the diversity of nationalities among employees and crew also brings forth a diversity of cultures and languages. Within the diverse cultural environment of Qatar Airways, a conflict arises concerning how a company establishes cultural

intimacy within its operations. This conflict extends from the cultures of expatriate employees to those of local employees, including Qataris themselves. The lack of cultural intimacy is also experienced by the researcher, who has been a permanent employee at Qatar Airways for 3.5 years. One of the conflicts that arise among colleagues is the use of technological advancements to undermine coworkers due to disagreements over work ethics brought by colleagues. Conflicts emerge from various cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, the researcher focuses on supporting the tourism transportation sector, specifically Qatar Airways, an airline company. The study titled "Cultural Dynamics of Intimacy in Airline Companies: A Case Study of Qatar Airways" is set in Qatar, the headquarters of Qatar Airways. This has led to numerous deficiencies experienced by the company. The lack of cultural intimacy can also manifest in the tourism industry, including hotels, tourist destination management, travel agencies, and supporting tourism transportation. As a result, this research formulates problem statements related to, among others: "(1) What is the organizational culture within Qatar Airways airline company?, (2) What forms of cultural intimacy occur within the airline company Qatar Airways?, (3) How does communication among employees take place, considering the synergy between cultural intimacy and organizational culture within Qatar Airways airline company?"

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing data collection methods through field observation and supported by literature review. The informant selection technique was carried out using purposive sampling (with inclusion criteria) and key person approach. The key person approach is employed when the researcher has obtained preliminary information about the research subject and requires key persons for in-depth interviews. These key persons are individuals responsible for management and administration in the respective field (Bungin, 2003). The researcher employed purposive sampling technique, involving 7 informants who served as key persons in this study. Their respective roles and tenures include 10 years as Duty Manager 10, 5 years as Senior Sales Assistant, 9 years as Boutique Supervisor, 3.5 years as Sales Assistant, 5 years as Administration Assistant, 4 years as Senior Almaha, and 4 years as Ground Handling.

The purpose of sampling is to obtain a description of the characteristics of observation units included in the sample, as well as to facilitate generalization and evaluate population criteria. This is attempted because the researcher cannot directly conduct research on all analysis units or individuals within the research population. The researcher draws information from a portion of the population, which serves as an illustration to represent the entire population.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Code and Theme Results

In this study, the coding results and themes are presented in a network diagrammatic form, such as tables and diagrams, which provide valuable graphical representation of the themes and their relationships (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The findings of this research then serve as a tool to report the discoveries, enabling readers to comprehend how the text is interpreted in detail in table below.

Code and Theme	Description
Employee Background	- Origin countries of employees with differences. - Data indicates a minimum education level from Diploma to Bachelor's degree. - Job position backgrounds ranging from entry-level staff to managers. - English as the foundational language for daily conversations. - Additional training felt to be lacking from the company.
Adaptation	- It is quite challenging for first-year employees to adapt to the local culture. Professional relationships among colleagues often lead to conflicts. - Communication barriers and work culture experienced by employees. - Various differences in effective approaches used by employees to overcome these challenges. - Work ethic and work culture among employees from different backgrounds
Organization Cultural	- It's quite easy to follow the hierarchy within the company. - Challenges in following the hierarchy within the company.
Job Promotion	- The data shows how difficult it is to obtain a job promotion within the company. - Internal political factors occurring in the recruitment of job promotions. - The data indicates a considerable number of complaints about differences in work ethic and the difficulty of obtaining job promotions.
Technological Advancements and Employee Recruitment Fundamentals	- GEMS (Groups Employment Management System) is an application used by employees to access personal data and training. - The required level of education and background for employee recruitment.

Source: Data Result, 2023

The informants also agree that the cultural differences in Qatar are quite distinct from the culture of their respective home countries. Due to the multicultural composition of the employees, as well as the users of Qatar Airways services, it is important for the employees to be adequately prepared to respond in different situations and also to adapt to the local culture.



Figure 1. Job Promotion

Unpleasant situations and conflicts among employees due to cultural differences. Out of three answers to questions referring to unpleasant situations in passenger interactions, the respondents stated that such situations often occur. Regarding conflicts with colleagues, there is agreement, and all respondents indicate that such conflicts occur quite frequently. On one hand, situations like these are unlikely to never occur, and considering the company's significant attention to this issue, it would be surprising if it happened frequently.

Next, the respondents answered a question about whether the company educates employees in the specific understanding of different cultures. Some respondents explained that training in this regard is very inadequate. Further clarification was requested from respondents who answered this question firmly. The explanations provided by the respondents mostly refer to sensitivity to religious and political issues, as well as caution with jokes. Respondents also explained that differences in religion and education often lead to different understandings of the same matters.

The following question is about the company's disciplinary policies implemented in different situations, so based on the organizational culture held by the company, it can be seen that sanctions and punishments should be the same for everyone, regardless of tenure, nationality, or gender.

Regarding conflicts or obstacles between colleagues, the informants from China and Sri Lanka provided examples and answered that they had witnessed such situations. The informants witnessed a situation where one employee spoke loudly to another member. The situation was resolved by sending an apology. Additionally, the same informant indicated that such conflicts most often arise due to facial expressions and tone of voice, while the informant from Indonesia indicated that conflicts arise due to roughness and laziness of employees.

The company does not prohibit its employees from wearing religious attributes; however, according to the researcher, staff or employees who wear religious attributes (especially in certain departments) are considered more suitable for working behind desks and/or serving airline users at levels or locations or departments that should or allow employees to wear

religious attributes. For instance, roles directly related to airline passengers (escorting) in some departments within this airline do not permit all of their staff to wear religious attributes. This policy is implemented to prevent unwanted incidents, including misunderstandings with passengers or vice versa. Complaints regarding disputes among colleagues or staff due to cultural differences also frequently occur. Indonesian and Moroccan informants who hold higher positions will listen to the root causes of the issues from both parties.

Next is technology and the basic requirements for employee recruitment. In relation to technological advancements, one utilized by the company is the data management and employee access system called GEMS (Groups Employment Management System). GEMS offers numerous features such as salary slips, employee personal data, leave schedules, roster schedules, and online training. Opportunities for contact among individuals belonging to different units are also present in this feature. Employees can access email and webex through GEMS using OTP from their respective mobile phones. The confidentiality of the technology used by employees is well-maintained as employees cannot use webex or send emails to email addresses and webex domains not associated with Qatar Airways.

This is done to prevent data breaches from non-Qatar Airways domains. This further emphasizes why not too much "burden" of professional matters should rely on informal communication that should not occur. Furthermore, GEMS allows workers to at least have an overview of what is happening across the entire organization, making employees more aware of their roles, job functions, and contributions to the company's global outcomes. This can provide motivation to employees by instilling a sense of ownership and participation in the organization.

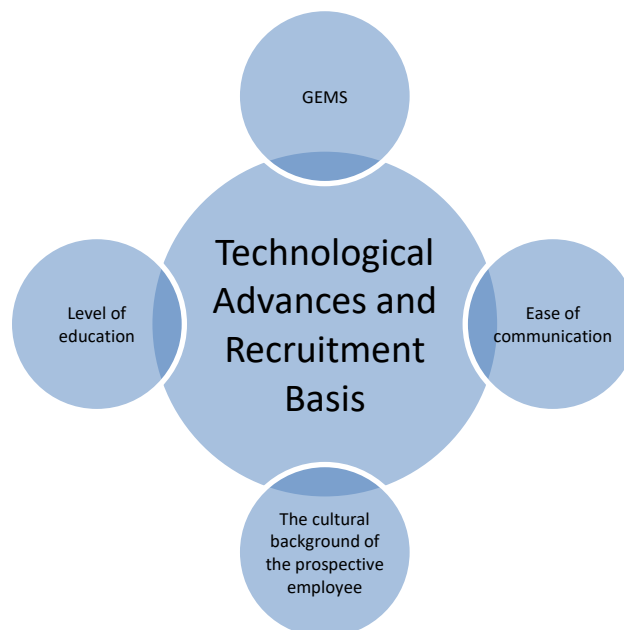


Figure 2. Technological Advances and Recruitment Basis

Based on Figure 2, regarding technological advancements and employee recruitment fundamentals, there are four sub-themes: the GEMS application, communication ease, cultural backgrounds of potential employees, and the educational levels of potential employees. With the current technological progress within the company, it is easy to assert that GEMS users utilize this technology effectively for communication as well as data and information management. However, more importantly, general meetings have provided an opportunity for individuals from

different units and teams to have easy access to information generated from various and diverse sources.

Similarly, with employee recruitment and job promotions conducted by the company, technological advancements utilized by the company come into play. In the recruitment of multinational or multicultural employees, Qatar Airways facilitates prospective candidates in directly accessing the airline's career website. It is quite evident that technological progress greatly aids both the company and employees in their work, interactions, and opportunities for job promotions.

Discussion

Organizational Culture at Qatar Airways

The organizational culture used as a research reference is according to Henry Mintzberg (in Hofstede, 2010), who is one of the leading authorities in organizational structure today. The main advantage of organizational culture is the ability to condense academic art into a small number of highly practical and easily understandable concepts. The organizational culture at Qatar Airways comprises five values: Pride in Qatar, Customer First, Driving Excellence, Honest & Loyal, and One Team, which are mandatory for every airline employee to possess.

The organizational culture held by Qatar Airways is said to be easily comprehensible. Organizational culture evolves over time, and the current organizational culture is the result of beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes that have contributed to the organization's past success. Employees are advised to adapt to the changes in organizational culture driven by external environmental factors as the organization develops.

Regarding the company's disciplinary policy applied in different situations for employees who violate organizational culture and established norms, based on the company's organizational culture, it can be seen that sanctions and punishments should be equal for everyone, regardless of tenure, nationality, or gender. However, if specific employee obligations are not fulfilled, and the consequences of non-compliance with established business rules occur, the company will impose sanctions on employees, such as failure to meet performance standards. Standards regarding the general physical appearance of employees are set by the company itself.

Issues become more complex if the company cannot manage internal conflicts effectively. One focal point of concern among employees is the promotion level which appears to be influenced by a specific culture and nation due to internal politics within the company. Promotions have several factors including employee performance, the number of employees needed in the open position, available wage budget for the open position, and one contributing factor is the cultural alignment possessed by employees already at managerial levels that can "support" candidates directly.

Dynamics of Cultural Intimacy at Qatar Airways

The definition of culture according to Metscher, et al. (2009) is the factor that shapes how a person perceives the world. In this context, what is occurring is a multitude of conflicts among fellow employees due to cultural differences. Direct misunderstandings between employees are being carried out to secure desired positions, such as numerous false complaints made by employees against their colleagues, thereby depriving co-workers of opportunities for job promotions. The culture or work ethos brought by each employee becomes one of the elements hindering the smooth functioning of cultural intimacy within the company.

Cultural alignment or work ethos of the majority culture present in the company becomes a crucial element in facilitating employees to attain the desired job promotions. The body gestures and facial expressions of employees from colder countries like Russia and its fragments

are often misused in the workplace, leading to new conflicts arising within the cultural intimacy at Qatar Airways.

Furthermore, adapting to the local culture is considered challenging during the initial years of employment, especially in Qatar. This is due to the cultural differences and legal regulations prevailing in Qatar, which are also adopted by the company. However, the process of adapting to the local culture tends to follow after employees enter their second and third years. Meanwhile, adapting to the work culture or ethos brought by employees from their home countries is considered not easy due to the significant differences in how employees should work according to the company's standard operating procedures (SOP). An informant revealed that Arabic speakers tend to have a higher level of laziness compared to employees from Asia. There are also instances of nationalistic employees who feel their nation is superior and smarter compared to other nationalities.

Currently, there is no training on how employees should interact with their colleagues. Additional training information can also have a positive impact on understanding cultural differences. Employees need knowledge on handling cultural and work ethos differences in additional training. One aspect that can be included in supplementary training is how employees react in conflict situations, representing a standard behavior that constantly allows for learning something new.

The lack of knowledge on how employees should navigate different work ethics and cultures from various countries makes the occurring conflicts complex. This is due to the employees' backgrounds not having previous experience working in a multi-cultural company. Employees' backgrounds, where they start working immediately after completing their education, result in a lack of understanding of how to behave in a different culture from their home culture.

Communication Between Employees

According to Alvesson (2016), technology is one of the factors that influences organizations in various ways. The development of advanced information and communication technology facilitates new work practices (such as remote work or telecommuting) that can also further drive globalization. This is because it can make it easier for employees to interact with passengers and colleagues from various cultural backgrounds.

Supported by sophisticated technology, direct employee-to-employee communication is considered fairly effective by the informants. However, many conflicts arise due to communication. Based on the analysis of informant responses, it is evident that the majority of informants agree that Arabs tend to be assertive and require more personal space, and their speech is loud and fast. In contrast, people from China and Southeast Asia speak softly and slowly. The informants believe that individuals from Far East cultures are more reserved compared to Europeans and Africans, while employees from Kyrgyzstan are said to have less expressive facial expressions compared to those from South Asia.

In the end, the informants indicate the importance of understanding these communication segments, as facial expressions and body language, even though they may appear similar, do not hold the same meaning in every culture. The research findings reveal the fact that the contributions of different cultural differences often intersect with each other, hence it is important to know what is considered acceptable and unacceptable in different cultural environments.

CONCLUSION

After determining the themes and breaking down and organizing all the existing themes through diagrams and network analysis, the entirety of the themes and the organized images can be visualized as a unity that should form a cultural intimacy within Qatar Airways. If all the elements of cultural intimacy are met without significant hindrances, a harmonious cultural intimacy will be established. However, based on the data collected by the researcher, there are still quite a few challenges, thus the cultural intimacy occurring within Qatar Airways Group cannot be considered optimal yet.

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