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**Arabic Communication Culture
in the Context of CRM**

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Arabic Communication Culture in the Context of CRM

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Abstract

Going through CRM literature, the author noticed that, there are different objectives for CRM systems i.e. retains customers for long, increase sales to existing and candidate customers, and others. And where it has been a dramatic growth in the acquisition of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Systems, But there has been, also, an increase in reported CRM failures, suggesting that the implementation issues are not just technical, but encompass wider behavior and cultural factors.

The main goal of the Customer Relationship Management, which is to win the "battle for customer's hearts and minds.", can not be achieved unless we can provide our customers with high quality value-added products and services that at least meet their expectations; which; can not be done with out being able to build relationships with customers that will allow us to know their needs and expectations at the first ground. However, in a globalization era organizations can not avoid the problem of cultural differences while dealing with different customers in different cultural contexts.

The literature on culture provides a set of general concepts and ideas as a way of looking at the world ignoring the inevitable differences between countries and individuals. Therefore, the author tries to highlight the interaction between Arabic Communication Culture in the context of CRM systems and how can this influence the success of such a system.

Keywords: CRM, Arabic Culture, Islamic Culture, Individual Culture.

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Introduction

Although Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is relatively a new concept, it has been deep-rooted naturally in the business environment starting from a neighborhood shop owners knew customers by name and built close relationships with them, going through the mass marketing and increased consumerism, and reaching the point where companies are trying to gain competitive advantage through the effective use of information and communications technology to build such a relationship that will allow them to win the battle for customer's hearts and minds. However, it seems that the "web-enabled CRM is now the norm rather than the exception" (Greenberg, 2002) therefore, the concentration on the coming pages will be on the web-enabled CRM.

There are a lot of literature that discusses the objectives for CRM systems i.e. retains customers for long, increase sales to existing customers and candidate customers, increase cross selling and others. But, as planned when customer relationship management systems have been invented, the main reason was, and still, to help companies to build a relationship with their customers to be able to know their needs and preferences. Whoever, to build a relationship with customer is not an easy task as before with the ever expanded ground that is full of customers with different values, norms, thoughts, perceptions, etc. You could sell a product or a service to a customer but to build a relationship with him/her is much more complex. Multinational organization is faced by that problem, how they build a relationship with different customers in different cultures. The evidence suggests that between 30 to 75 percent of CRM initiatives fail because organizations roll them out without assessing their cultural readiness and considering CRM applications to be the end of customer centric approach (Simpson, 2002). Moreover, culture is frequently named as a determinant of usability of computers, thus the culture of your customers, as on of the users of the system, makes a difference regarding whether he/she is willing or able to use a certain technology. For example, in Arab countries people still "places high value on verbal forms of communication" this may limit the use of the IT application as communication means. (Heeks, Richard 2006: 32).

The impact of cultural differences on the development and use of information and communications technologies has gain an increasing interest in the IS literature. Since many companies are now doing business beyond their national boundaries, and these global activities are facilitated and supported to a large extent by current communications and information technologies, it is important to understand the impact of cultural differences on these activities (Ives & Jarvenpaa, 1991; Shore & Venkatachalam, 1994; Tractinsky & Jarvenpaa, 1995, Myers and Tan, 2002).

Customer Relationship Management System, and as what the word "Relationship" may suggest, has two faces: the one that is seen by the company and another one that is seen by the customer. This system provide the company with "view of customers" (Laudon & Laudon, 2006a: 394) and at the same time it provides customer "with a single view of the company" (Laudon & Laudon, 2006b: 394). For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on the

second face of the system, seen by the “Arab” customer, and how the Arab communication culture will affect the usage and effectiveness of such a system.

Culture:

Culture or the complex collection of knowledge, folklore, language, rules, rituals, habits, lifestyles, attitudes, beliefs, and customs links and gives a common identity to a particular group of people at a specific point in time. Thus all social units, regardless of its size, develop their own unique culture. Even in two-person relationships, a culture develops over time. In friendship relationships, for example, partners develop their own history, shared experiences, language patterns, rituals, habits, and customs that give that relationship a special character, that differentiates it from other relationships. For example they will have their special dates, places, songs, or events that come to have a unique and important symbolic meaning for them.

Groups also develop cultures, composed of the collection of rules, rituals, customs, and other characteristics that give an identity to the social unit. Where a group traditionally meets, whether meetings begin on time or not, what topics are discussed, how decisions are made, and how the group socializes are all elements of what, over time, become defining and differentiating elements of its culture.

Organizations also have cultures, often apparent in particular patterns of dress, layout of workspaces, meeting styles and functions, ways of thinking about and talking about the nature and directions of the organization, leadership styles, and so on.

The most rich and complex cultures, the concern of this paper, are those that are associated with a society or a nation, and the term “culture” is most commonly used to refer to these characteristics, including language and language-usage patterns, rituals, rules, and customs. A societal or national culture also includes such elements as significant historical events and characters, philosophies of government, social customs, family practices, religion, economic philosophies and practices, belief and value systems, and concepts and systems of law.

Leung et al. (2005) define culture as values, beliefs, norms, and behavioral patterns of a group; people in a society for national culture, staff of an organization for organizational culture, specific profession for professional culture, etc. Hall, (1976) has asserted that beliefs and values dictate the way people think, behave, solve problems, make decisions, plan and lay out their homes and cities, and even organize their economic, political, and transportation systems. Definitions of culture vary from the very inclusive as Herskovitz (1955) defines it as the human-made part of the environment; to the highly focused as Shweder and LeVine, (1984, p.110) who define it as ‘a shared meaning system’. However, and as what Groeschl and Doherty (2000, p.14) has pointed out, culture is complex and very difficult to define because “Culture consists of several elements of which some are implicit and others are explicit. Most often these elements are explained by terms such as behavior, values, norms, and basic assumptions”. In some of the literatures culture will

be discussed as tacit or implicit artefacts such as ideologies, coherent sets of beliefs, basic assumptions, shared sets of core values, important understandings, and the collective will (Jermier et al., 1991; Groeschl and Doherty, 2000), while some other times the term discussed including some more explicit observable cultural artefacts such as norms and practices (Jermier et al., 1991; Groeschl and Doherty, 2000; Hofstede 1998), symbols (Burchell et al. 1980), as well as language, ideology, rituals, myths, and ceremony (Karahanna et al., 2005).

The socio-cultural system and the individual system are two theoretical frameworks likely to be studied when researchers investigate cultural aspects. The former is concerned with the institutions, norms, roles, and values as the outside elements that direct the individual behavior, and the latter is concerned with the subjective culture as reflected by the individual's perception of the elements of the culture system (Dorfman and Howell, 1988). For example: Hofstede, (1991, p.5) defines national culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another". He suggests that people share a collective national character that represents their cultural mental programming. This mental programming shapes their values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, perceptions and behavior (Myers and Tan, 2002). However, Triandis (1972) defines culture as an individual's characteristic way of perceiving the man-made part of one's environment that will influence the interpersonal behavior and create identity for individuals. This means that by analyzing the behavior of an individual of a society we may not provide a specific identification of the rules, roles, norms and values of that society but rather we will show the perception of that individual of the shared cultures he/she belongs to.

Culture has been studied within IS discipline at various levels, including national (macro level, cross-cultural), organizational, group (sub-culture, professional, special interest, social class, etc.) and individual (micro level, subjective culture) (Triandis, 1972; Hofstede, 1984; Dorfman and Howell, 1988; Myers and Tan, 2002; McCoy, 2003; Ali and Alshawi, 2004a). Culture at a social or national level is the culture shared between people in a society or a country (Hofstede, 1984). On the other hand, culture that is shared between people working in an organization is called organizational culture (Stahl, 2003). Also, culture that is shared between people with a similar profession or occupation is called professional or occupational culture or sub-culture of a specific interest group i.e., political party or a social class (Myers and Tan, 2002). However, individual culture is referred to as the subjective culture of an individual which is related to how much an individual takes from the different cultures that the individual is part of or how he/she perceives the available cultural principles to create his/her own identity (Dorfman and Howell, 1988; Karahanna et al., 2005).

Another theme within the IS/IT discipline is to give an operational perspective to the culture concept, to link it with the potential influence on IS/IT phenomena. Stahl (2003) defines culture as a determinant of usability of computers. That means that the culture from which a developer, programmer, or user stems makes a difference regarding whether he/she is willing or able to use a certain technology. From this angle, culture in the sense of a meaning-

constituting horizon of the collective life-world determines the perception and use of IT. This may be for the organizational level where culture can influence whether employees are able and willing to use certain technologies. It may also be true on a social level where people shared perceptions have some bearing on the use of IT. A national culture that emphasizes sharing and the collective; like the Arabic and the Islamic culture; for example, will likely lead to different level of usage for information technologies and their applications compared with one that emphasizes the individual and competition (Raboy 1997; Riis 1997) where it is obvious that the second type may encourages more use of IS/IT technologies for the benefit of the individual competing for personal gains ignoring the collectiveness of the whole body of the group created and maintained by personal relationships.

Communication-culture Relationship:

All social units; whether a relationship, group, organization, or society; develops a culture over time. While the defining characteristics; or combination of characteristics; of each culture are unique, all cultures share certain common functions. Three such functions that are particularly important from a communication perspective are (1) linking individuals to one another, (2) providing the basis for a common identity, and (3) creating a context for interaction and negotiation among members.

The relationship between communication and culture is a very complex and intimate one. First, cultures are created through communication; that is, communication is the means of human interaction through which cultural characteristics; whether customs, roles, rules, rituals, laws, or other patterns; are created and shared. It is not so much that individuals set out to create a culture when they interact in relationships, groups, organizations, or societies, but rather that cultures are a natural by-product of social interaction. In a sense, cultures are the “residue” of social communication. Without communication and communication media, it would be impossible to preserve and pass along cultural characteristics from one place and time to another. One can say, therefore, that culture is created, shaped, transmitted, and learned through communication. The reverse is also the case; that is; communication practices are largely created, shaped, and transmitted by culture.

Arabic communication-culture and CRM Success:

Perhaps the most well-known cultural continuum is Hall's (1976) discussion of high-context, Arab culture is an example of that, and low-context cultures. The difference between high and low context cultures depends on how much meaning is found in the context versus in the code. Low-context cultures, such as the American culture, tend to place more meaning in the language code and very little meaning in the context. For this reason, communication tends to be specific, explicit, and analytical.

In high-context cultures, like the Arab culture, meaning is embedded more in the context rather than the code. As Hall states, "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (1982, p.18). Thus the listener must understand the contextual cues in order to grasp the full meaning of the message. Therefore, in such a culture, when it comes to the understanding of the usability of computerized or web-based CRM system, understanding the customer's message without being at the same physical context is questionable.

People raised in high-context systems expect more from others than do the participants in low-context systems. When talking about something that they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his\her interlocutor to be more sagacious and sensible and to know what is bothering him\her, so that he\she doesn't have to be specific. The result is that he\she will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly; this keystone; is the role of his\her interlocutor. (1976, p. 98). Thus a relationship with some personal flavor is preferable, which is not the case with the web-enabled CRM systems.

While in low context cultures, the burden appears to fall on the speaker to accurately and thoroughly convey the meaning in his\her spoken or written messages, in the high-context exchanges, much of the "burden of meaning" appears to fall on the listener. Thus the implementation of a computerized system to build a relationship that will help the receiver, in the communication process, to understand the sender is of no value without having a real personal relation or face to face conversation.

Anthropologists have long posited the distinctions between oral, the Arabe culture is an example of that, versus literate dominant societies. Gold (1988) highlights numerous features of the oral tradition, including repetition as a means for keeping attention as well as making the speech "agreeable to the ear". As Gold states, "the audience cooperates with the speaker by trying to understand the meaning or 'gist' rather than the actual content" (1988, p. 170). Thus listeners play a valuable part in constructing meaning within an oral exchange which means that the audiences are quite active in the communication process.

With heightened listener involvement, the aesthetics of style and audience relations may supersede the informational aspects of a message. An oral message may be valued more for its affective power than its cognitive merits, which is missing in any web-enabled communication making it a choice that is not really preferable for communication. Tannen (1982) noted the interpersonal involvement between speaker and audience, as speakers strive for a more emotional and participatory responses from their audience. Clearly with style overriding substance, aural ornaments such as formulas, humor, exaggeration, parallelism, phonological elaboration, special vocabulary, puns, metaphor, and hedges are critical (Feldman, 1991; Gold, 1988). All this can not be found while using web-enabled systems to communicate.

Repetition in Arabic is a decidedly positive feature. It is not uncommon to find a string of descriptive phrases or words all referring to one phenomenon (Shouby, 1951). Not only is there repetition within a message, but often times

repetition is used as a strategy among messages where repetition is to repeat something over and over again, or to be wordy or verbose which is not a feature that can a web-enabled system provide.

Finally, it can be said that Muslims drive their social system from the teachings of the Qur'an (which Muslims believe is a book revealed by the God to Mohammed), and from the *sun'nah* (the recorded sayings and behavior of Mohammed). Thus, the culture of all the Muslims is built upon the Islamic ideology which stresses the fact that all our behaviors and deeds are being counted and recorded and they will be asked about them by *Allah* and all our behaviors and deeds must be consistent with *Allah's* principles if we do not want to make him angry and do not want to receive his punishment. And where it has been strictly stated in the *Qur'an* and *sun'nah* that shaking hands with each others; for individuals from the same gender; and even smiling to each others are good deeds which will lead to *Allah's* satisfaction and thus to the heaven. This creates a culture that stresses the importance of personal relations and face to face interaction.

The case study:

Shinas College of Technology was founded in September 2005. The campus is located at Al-Aqr, on the northern outskirts of Shinas. It is about six kilometers from the city center of the road to Dubai that links the Sultanate and the United Arab Emirates. The College started with the English Language Center (ELC) which qualifies students to pursue Certificate in Engineering, Certificate in Information Technology and Certificate in Business, the three academic departments in the college. ELC provides a level-based English Language program for all students admitted to the College. The program is specifically designed to improve the students' study skills as well as general abilities to communicate in English. A placement test is administered to all students so they can be placed in Elementary, Intermediate or Advanced. Exceptional students may skip the foundation year.

To provide its customers, the students, with high quality services that will help the college to increase the level of satisfaction and thereby maintain a good relationship, the college has started to use the online registration in the year 2009 where the students can access the internet from wherever they are, select the group or section; timing; and the lecturer they want, register, and printout or save their timetable. If the student faces any problem he/she is provided with a contact number where he/she can call and receive the needed assistance from a standby individual, one for each department, so called the registrar, where the three are non Arabic speakers.

The Department of Business Studies was formally established during the Academic year 2007-2008. It started its certificate program with 66 students and 3 teaching staff. Within the first year of inception, the department tripled its enrolment figure and doubled its number of teaching staff. Presently the department offers two major specializations namely Accounting and Human Resource Management in both levels diploma and Higher Diploma to more than 550 students. It has 35 full-time academic staff handling various

courses or subjects, 36 subjects from which 5 of them are college requirements which means that all the college students from all the departments have to study.

To study the level of satisfaction and usage of the students about the system, and as the HoD of the business department, I was involved in an observational study from which I come up with the following results:

- All of them were babbling among themselves saying that they do not want this system and prefer face-to-face advising and registration
- All of them were coming with family problems stories where I was forced to spend the time listening to non-relevant things
- None of them was satisfied with dealing only with the registrar saying that she is not able to understand them, where she receive only 18 case the first day, most of them came back to me, I did receive 38 case only in the first 4 hours of the day which means about one case each 6 minutes.
- While, when asked, about 90% of them say that they will spend no less than 5 hours on the net, around 78% of them call me as it was difficult to come personally, where it is not requiring them more than an internet access.

Conclusion:

Stahl, (2003) has proposed the question of “Up to what point do different cultures diverge and what, if anything, do they have in common?” This question is of interest to CRM systems implementations because an answer would inform us of what analysts and designers of CRM systems can take for granted independent of their target culture and what parts of the systems would have to be customized or even re-conceptualized. This study shows how the Arab communication-culture as an oral, high-context culture is not, yet, a good environment for such systems, like the CRM systems, which are intended to replace the personal, face to face communication that is seen as a time consuming process in the literate. It suggests that more interactive systems need to take place all with an Arabic speaker contact individuals where the customers, the students in our case, will have the feeling that they have the mutual understanding needed to help them.

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