Recruiting Women to Work in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Challenges in Leadership and Cultural Intelligence

Teaching Notes

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Case Summary

This case illuminates the challenges faced in recruiting women to work in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), even for a brief assignment. Despite the fact that women work abroad far less often than their male counterparts – and that working abroad is a desirable leadership competency – recruiting women to work in certain regions of the world is more challenging than in other regions, and may create a challenge for the recruiter. The case further highlights the advancing role of women in higher education in the KSA.

Pedagogical Use of the Case

Case studies create a unique learning opportunity because they are based on real-life challenges, and therefore, require real-life decision-making to solve the problems. If you approach this case with an open mind, a spirit for the desire to learn, and a desire to grow, you will find this learning style can be helpful in your career, particularly if you want to work in a global capacity. At the end of the case, we anticipate you will be better informed about the challenges involved in recruiting people to work in certain parts of the world, see differences in how males and females may feel about working globally, and approach real-life situations with critical thinking skills and empathy. These are all skills modern-day employers seek. The case is divided into four main areas to help guide you. The purpose, learning outcomes, and discussion questions are all clearly identified and critical to the actual case. We have provided a brief introduction to the KSA Higher Education system and the role of women in the KSA to get you immersed in the context of the case. The most important part of working through this case is to imagine yourself in the context of the situation and what you would do. Have fun, think boldly, and lead your team to a resolution you can defend.

Teaching Objectives

By the end of this case, students should better understand the following:

1. Working abroad is an excellent way to improve global leadership competencies and/or business knowledge;
2. Having knowledge about a region of the world that is less-often visited by US citizens is a competitive advantage in the workplace;
3. Expanding one’s view of the world is helpful personally as well as professionally;
4. Developing global competencies and cultural intelligence may increase opportunities for additional financial compensation.

Target Audience

The case is designed so that it may be used by graduate or undergraduate students. It may appeal to students in business, higher education administration, or general leadership. The case reminds readers that having leadership capacity – especially global capacity – is necessary for women. It further encourages women to seek opportunities to work abroad, and especially to consider countries that have cultural norms that are quite different than those in the US, for learning and development. In particular, the case documents ways in which gender can inform the various institutions and practices of international relations.
Suggested Teaching Strategy

Managing the “global leadership gap” is one of the most often cited concerns of businesses today (Sloan, Hazucha, & Van Katwyk, 2003, p. 235). In light of this, the instructor for this case should keep in mind the opportunity to not only hone in on the hard skills of leadership development, but also, the soft skills of teaching a highly needed workplace competency. This case will expose students to the concept of cultural intelligence (or cultural quotient) which, when used correctly, can translate international experiences into effective experiential workplace skills.

The ways in which this case is envisioned to be taught is through an entire class discussion, with individual thoughts about working abroad, and then discussions in break-out groups. First, the instructor would introduce the case in the context of a leadership opportunity, and then students would individually consider what it would be like to work in the KSA. Following, students would break into small groups and discuss these questions:

1. What are the key issues you (man or woman) should analyze before deciding to participate in a workshop in the KSA?
2. What role do you think the family may play in a woman’s decision to participate in international travel assignments?
3. What factors do you think ultimately influence someone to decide to accept an assignment like this?
4. What are some key factors that might influence women to take on their international assignments or turn them down?
5. What lessons on leadership might you learn from traveling to, and working in, the KSA?

After small group discussions, the students would reconvene in the larger class to compare responses to the questions.

Suggested Answers to Discussion Questions

1. What are the key issues you (man or woman) should analyze before deciding to participate in a workshop in the KSA?

A common consideration for men and women, but particularly women, could be related to safety. Men may feel safer traveling by themselves than women do – not just overseas, but also, domestically. However, considering the differences, real and assumed, among women concerning the Middle East, more women may worry for their physical safety.

A second consideration when traveling to the Middle East region may relate to cultural differences. Women have to alter their behavior to meet cultural expectations regarding clothing (wearing the abaya and hijab), eating separately, or being escorted to go anywhere beyond their hotel room, while men do not. However, men need to be equally aware of these differences, in reverse, so as to not get in an elevator with women or sit in the wrong section, for example.

Lastly, men and women need to consider the differences in the flexibility of their schedules and requirements at home. In the past, men had more flexibility in their schedules than women, especially those who were married with children. If a man had a spouse to care for
the children and take care of all details around the home, then he had more availability to
travel abroad. Today, women have more flexibility to travel abroad, especially if they are single
and have no children. Times have also changed in that it is more acceptable for women to
take business trips without their families than it was 40 or 50 years ago.

2. What role do you think the family may play in a woman's decision to participate in international
travel assignments?

If a woman has a spouse, he or she would need to be supportive and encouraging to make
such a trip abroad. With so much negative news coverage about the Middle East, traveling to
the region is seen more like a risky military assignment, rather than a career enhancer. If a
woman has children, she may wonder if traveling to such a far-off land is “worth it” in
exchange for the time spent away from her family.

Even a single woman may discuss this type of travel with family members or her friends. It is
not a common travel destination, especially given the restrictions on women in the KSA. Many
Westerners believe this type of trip is too uncomfortable given the restrictions and demands
for a woman.

3. What factors do you think ultimately influence someone to decide to accept an assignment like
this?

There is a combination of factors that would lead one to take an assignment like this. The first
is a desire to go to the Middle East. There is no amount of cajoling that will push someone
into this decision if she does not want to go to the region. However, speaking with others who
have been to the region, and having the opportunity to go with fellow Americans who “know
the ropes” and have been there before, definitely helps. Learning that others have enjoyed
and grown from the experience helps the individual to commit to the decision, if they are
wavering.

Being passionate about helping other female leaders is a foundational element in deciding to
travel to the KSA. Presumably, all women who go have strong aspirations to make a
difference. In order to have the opportunity to share the leadership content they wish to
disseminate, women must be open-minded and willing to wear some of the traditional
coverings required of the region.

The generous stipend and comfortable accommodations (business class airfare and
international hotels) help in the decision-making process. If one has the desire to go to the
region, and to help women become leaders, paying her for this work at a competitive rate
allows her to feel valued for the work she is doing. If low pay and sub-par accommodations
were offered, a woman may feel that the KSA does not value her contributions, and she may
decide not to go.

A final factor that may influence a woman to pursue such an international assignment is the
support and encouragement of a mentor, colleague, or supervisor. Having this piece of critical
support often helps in the final decision of whether to attend, since without it, one may feel
isolated or judged about the decision to go.

4. What are some key factors that might influence women to take on their international assignments
or turn them down?
Gender definitely plays a role. In the past, it was not encouraged, nor looked upon with favor, when a woman traveled alone to other countries. In recent decades, attitudes have changed – the feminist movement of the 1960s opened many doors to new opportunities for women. In addition, prior to WWII, women did not serve in as many leadership positions as men. Males had more opportunity to travel and work abroad, and because of that, a standard of practice and a cultural norm was created. Now, as women have taken on more leadership roles, and more research has been conducted, we are learning that women have a lot to offer on the global stage. Many researchers including Eagly and Johnson (1990) and Harvey (2015) have stated that women possess desirable skills – seen as more collaborative or team-oriented, which encourages economic growth. These skills are being sought more now than ever before.

5. What lessons in leadership might you learn from traveling to, and working in, the KSA?

Implicit in the answer to this question is that both men and women gain cultural intelligence by traveling and working abroad. Stefanco tells us that recent research, including scores from the Global Mindset Inventory, “demonstrates that the development of global leadership requires living and working in other countries for a significant period of time” (Stefanco, 2017, p. 60). If one considers a short-term assignment first, such as a week-long experience in the KSA, opportunities for longer projects and greater global leadership competencies could be developed.

Cross-Cultural Discussion

If teaching this case in a class with students from multiple countries and cultures, ask students to discuss elements that are different in the U.S. versus their home country, or culture. If not in a multi-cultural classroom, perhaps ask students to discuss differences in dialect or “accent” when a person is from a different region in the U.S. If appropriate, ask for differences in religious practices and customs among students. What makes them different? How do you handle the cross-cultural differences in women’s roles as a global leader? Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory could also be used as a framework to better understand cross-cultural communication and its application to business.

Gender Issues

Are women treated differently in various regions? Does religion play a role in how women are treated in Western societies? In other countries? What is the role of women in business and society? What are some gender issues you might observe in your current situation or workplace? Are those universal or particular to your own culture?

Recruiting Strategies

Think about the best ways to recruit women to participate in this type of experience. Perhaps looking for women who were Fulbright Scholars or who served in the Peace Corp would be one way to find willing participants. Recruiting faculty from schools of International Studies, International Business, or from World Language Departments could be other possible venues.

Theory Pointers and Analysis
Although feminist theory could have been an obvious underpinning in which to situate the case, we elected to use a perspective to simply examine the way in which assumptions about gender (and gender relations) inform, and are reproduced by, the practices of the players involved: universities and international entities. An analysis sensitive to gender calls for more than simply documenting the underrepresentation of women – it demands, instead, that we look for inclusive catalysts.

Research on unconscious gender bias could be explored to note how women may be affected in the workplace. Even when there are rules and laws in place, there may be subtle biases that individuals have that can hold women back from being successful leaders. Work by Banaji and Greenwald (Blindspot, 2013) as well as an article by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) could be explored for more on this subject.

Women are underrepresented in leadership positions in both the public and private sectors (Catalyst, 2016; Cook, 2012; Eagly, 2007; Haslam & Ryan, 2008). Having the skills necessary to take on leadership roles is paramount in ensuring that women will first be considered – and then be successful. When thinking about globalization, many opportunities are available for women to become active in this arena. However, more men tend to benefit from these types of assignments than women. “Although much of the literature on globalization focuses on the field of business and the overwhelming majority of world leaders are male, global growth in all sectors requires women’s full participation” (Stefanco, 2017, p. 57).

Learning to see oneself in global leadership positions is a piece of the puzzle in getting more women to participate. By reading and engaging with a case study, women may be better prepared to take on such roles. International assignments are a powerful means of leadership development because they “provide opportunities for global leaders to experience surprises that will stimulate reflection and exploration that are crucial for learning” (Hall, Zhu, & Yan, 2001, p. 332).

References


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