



Culture and Work Styles in Dubai.

Considered the most desirable location in the Middle East for a head office, Dubai has seen a huge influx of international companies and workers. Doing business there, however, is more difficult than simply following corporate policies and standards. Cultural norms rooted in Islamic law affect everything from when and how business is conducted to office design. Success is based on understanding these differences.

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The Middle East is an area that's burgeoning in many ways—politically, economically, and demographically. Bordered by Asia, Africa, and Europe, the region is an assortment of cultures and religions. Ethnic groups that live in the U.A.E. include Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, European, African, and Emirati.

Although the region itself is ancient, dating back 3,500 years, the demographics of its people currently skew young. Sixty-five percent of the population in the Middle East is under the age of 25,¹ and creating jobs for this generation of young people is an overriding concern in these countries.

Much of the region's wealth is attributable to having the world's largest deposits of easily extractable oil, but the petrochemicals, aluminum, banking, and tourism sectors have also been important to the economic health of the region. Countries in the Middle East are expected to see a three to five percent increase in GDP.²

The Middle East is often perceived by Westerners to be synonymous with conflict, but there are many areas in the Middle East where people of many different nationalities meet, live, and work side by side. The United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) is one of those areas, and the largest emirate, Dubai, with its high influx of international workers (expatriates make up 80 percent of the workforce there³), is an excellent example. As a microcosm of the region and as the most desirable location in the Middle East for a head office, according to one study,⁴ it's a good example of the issues that can come up when East meets West in the workplace.

Politically stable, Dubai has developed a reputation for being a safe place for people of all nationalities to work and for companies from all over the world to do business. It is a constitutional monarchy that's been ruled since 1995 by Sheikh Mohammed, who had a vision of Dubai as an international hub for business and leisure.

His vision was quickly realized. In 1990, the number of tall buildings in Dubai could be counted on one hand. Just 20 years later, the skyline is crowded with skyscrapers, including the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world. Dubai is small (about twice the size of Rhode Island) but has more cultural diversity per square foot than perhaps anyplace in the world. Of its two million inhabitants, only 100,000 are citizens.⁵ The rest are there on work visas. Women make up 14 percent of the workforce.⁶ Arabic is the official language of Dubai, but most people use English to conduct business.

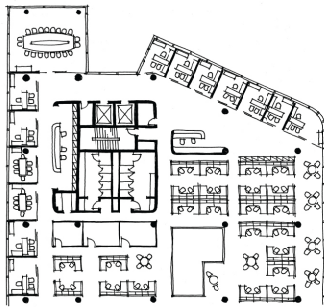
Culture

Islam, the official religion, pervades every aspect of life, and understanding it is central to understanding the culture and people and to conducting business in Dubai. Showing disrespect of Islam is a serious and punishable offense. The Islamic faith emphasizes things like generosity, respect, and modesty. An individual's honor is paramount, and their indirect style of communication (business discussions rarely result in a direct "no") accommodates the cultural desire to save face. While talking,

they may leave less personal space than many other cultures, but it's considered rude to step back—and Arabs place a high value on civility. Men shake hands when meeting or departing, but Arab women usually don't shake hands with men, Arab or non-Arab. Devout Muslim men generally place a hand over their own hearts when greeting women and that is the safest way for a foreigner to greet a Muslim woman, as well.

People use each other's first and last names when greeting each other, as well as any titles. Status is important and the most senior person in the group is always greeted first.

To show they are interested in each other and not just in the business about to be conducted, individuals will ask each other about their respective family members two or three times (although never about the health of female members). Muslims take pride in their hospitality, and any offer of hospitality should be accepted, again to preserve the honor of the host. These are the ways of the citizens of Dubai. But the citizens of Dubai are a minority in their own land, and their way is not the only way. With people of so many nationalities in the city, there isn't a typical dress code. Instead, the people wear the clothing of their homeland, but are also respectful of the culture of Dubai. Arab men wear a loose, ankle-length white cotton garment called a thobe. Arab women usually wear an abaya, which covers them from shoulders to feet. Some women also wear a headscarf. Foreign men typically wear a tie, long-sleeve shirt, and pants for business. Western women wear western clothing, but are careful to cover their shoulders, arms, and legs. It's considered impolite to cross one's legs or to show the soles of one's feet or shoes.

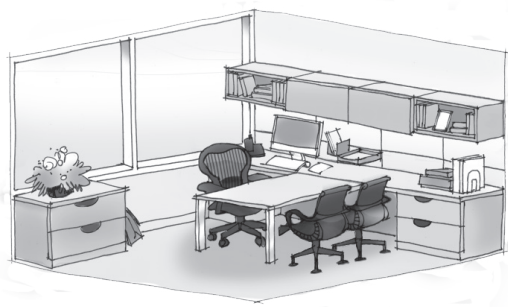


Islam prohibits alcohol and it's illegal to have alcohol in Dubai without a license. Bars and hotels are allowed to serve alcohol to visiting guests, however, and expat residents can apply for a license that allows them to buy a fixed amount of alcohol every month. Any display of drunkenness in public, regardless of blood alcohol level, is grounds for arrest, as is public display of affection. Punishment can take the form of fines or incarceration.

The Workplace

Just as there isn't a typical style of dress, there isn't a typical style of office. That depends on the sector (public or private), the owner (international company or local company), and the sponsor (laissez faire or involved).

In the government sector and in companies that are locally owned, the workplace is hierarchical, and offices are one way of conveying status. The general population might have a white laminate work surface, a three-drawer pedestal, and a task chair. Managers' offices will have a similar configuration but a higher back chair, a return unit, and a nicer finish on the furniture legs. Senior managers might have a veneer top. Those who own or run the company have large, enclosed offices, lavishly outfitted.



The high value the culture puts on relationships is evident in the way people integrate work and socializing. The work day begins around 8:00 a.m. and may go until 6:00 p.m. and includes morning and afternoon tea breaks, long lunches followed by a rest, and several breaks for prayer in the afternoon.

In multinational companies, the offices tend to reflect the culture of the home office of the parent company, but the extent varies according to how involved the company's Emirati sponsor is. Any company that isn't local needs such a sponsor in order to set up shop in Dubai, and a hands-on sponsor can have an influence on the look and feel of the office space.

For example, a large multinational company may have corporate standards for workspace size, furnishings, and ergonomic support, but "those get lost in translation," says Jennie Stallings, dealer and training manager for Herman Miller in the Middle East and Africa. "One European company had a height-adjustable desk and a particular chair as its standard package for its European offices. The local sponsor reviewed the plan and rejected it. His line of reasoning was that no one would work standing up, so there's no need for height adjustable desks. And, since the company wouldn't be able to use its standard package, anyway, it may as well open up the bidding process. Then he strongly encouraged the company to seriously consider his friend's bid."

Sending business to family and friends is part of the Arab culture. And having an involved sponsor can also work in a multinational company's favor when the sponsor urges his other contacts to use the products and services of the company he's sponsoring.

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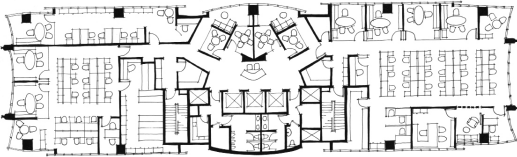
The long breaks provide the opportunity for connection that may result in business. "The time you spend with your customer or with somebody for lunch can turn out to be a business opportunity," says Louda Mattar, Supply Chain Manager at H2O Concepts. "This is the culture here."⁷ Because so much time is spent socializing, meetings may run long, delaying the start of the next meeting. Or perhaps the next meeting will be cancelled altogether. It's all part of the normal day for Muslims—but Westerners are still expected to be on time for meetings. In short, people and relationships are more important than schedules. "The rituals of daily life don't change just because people are at work," says Stallings.

The days are different, however, during the month of Ramadan. Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset, and eating in public is prohibited during those same hours. The business day is abbreviated, with workers going home at around 2:00 p.m. to rest, but when the sun sets, they gather with extended family and friends to eat and socialize. Although the setting is casual and children may be playing underfoot, these conversations often morph into work. In this way, work and life are tightly interwoven to form community.

Religion is a focal point of life every day, not just during the month of Ramadan. The work week begins on Sunday and goes through Thursday. Muslim men are required to attend Friday prayer, which is congregational and generally held in a mosque.

Some offices have prayer rooms. Public sector companies and multinationals with over 50 employees must provide separate ones for men and women and places to clean up before prayers. In small, private companies, a male manager will simply close his door and everyone will know not to bother him for five minutes. Workers who aren't managers may take prayer rugs to the corner of a room that faces Mecca and pray there.

Workspace Design and Layout



In the private sector, especially with large multinational companies, workplace design and layout tends to be traditional, i.e., private offices with large wood desks with full fronts and large leather chairs that make it clear who makes the decisions. Western-educated designers create work environments with access to windows. Workers who are not managers sit in work areas with low panels so they have access to natural light. Installations will often have the same footprint from floor to floor with very few changes. Dubai is just beginning to use open floor plans but the plans still include lots of workstation walls. It's unlikely that the owner will ever sit with the general population, says Stallings.



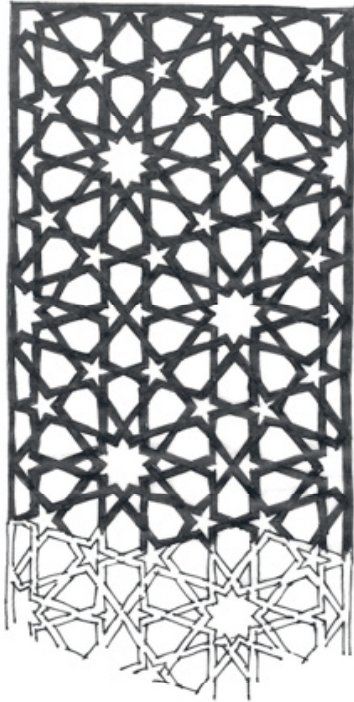
Often, Western organizations setting up offices in Dubai will follow typical corporate standards but will incorporate (in addition to prayer rooms) accents of local style, such as Arabic fretwork, a closeable canteen area for privacy during Ramadan, and modesty panels at the front and sides of a workstation.

Primary design considerations are the cost of real estate and the construction budget, rather than job function or technology support, which tend to be an afterthought except in global companies. Furthermore, local companies and the private sector don't think in terms of ergonomic needs. "That's not part of the design process," says Stallings, unless the decision-maker is a high-level manager who has been educated in the west or has been otherwise exposed to the field of ergonomics.⁸

There's an economic reason many ergonomic tools used in North America are not used much in Dubai. Income earned in the Middle East is tax-free. The city is full of workers who've come to make more money than they can in their own countries. When they have enough saved to start their own businesses back home or when they get tired of being separated from their families, they leave. Owners aren't very motivated to invest in an employee they know will be moving on soon.

In addition, there's no such thing as worker's compensation in Dubai, so there's no incentive for an employer to try to make sure the employee doesn't develop back pain or a repetitive stress injury. The predominant employer attitude is "payment for

services." If the worker isn't delivering, then the company doesn't feel any obligation to keep him or her on the payroll. The Dubai offices of multinational companies, which also generally follow local labor laws and regulations, may see things the same way.



Technology use is intermittent but growing rapidly. Office workers may have a smart phone or mobile device. There is internet access at work, but many companies will block certain sites, and non-managerial employees may be given e-mail accounts but not browsing capabilities. Unlike multinationals doing business in Dubai, local businesses don't typically have internet or intranet sites. The large number of youth in the region and the rapid economic development may speed the rate of acceptance of technology.

Growth and the Environment

The growth of Dubai has been the envy of the other Emirates, but it has also taken its toll on the environment. Desalination plants that make the water drinkable emit so much carbon dioxide that the U.A.E. leaves one of the largest carbon footprints in the world. "Growth has been so intense and enormous, but people forgot about the environment," Jean-François Seznec, a Middle East expert and professor at Georgetown University in Washington, told the New York Times. "The attitude was, business comes first. Now, they are seeing increased problems, and they realize they have to be careful."⁹

That awareness is extending to design. Wanting to lead by example, the Dubai Chamber of Commerce began retrofitting the Chamber of Commerce with sustainability in mind in 1999, before there was widespread understanding of the importance of sustainability. In 2009, it became the first building in the Arab world to achieve LEED certification.¹⁰ The effort "...demonstrates the Chamber's commitment to conserving resources and implementing best practices, and reinforces our strategic objectives of creating a favourable business environment for the Emirate, supporting the development of business and promoting Dubai as an international business hub," said HE Eng Hamad Buamim, director general of the Chamber.¹¹

Indeed, some say the ideas of sustainability are imbedded in Islam. Sigrid Nökelm, a sociologist who has studied Islam, says "Khilafa refers to the idea of mankind as trustee of creation. It is the duty of mankind to maintain the order of creation. The fruits of the earth are to be enjoyed, but its resources must not be wastefully exploited." The research she did for the Munich-based foundation Stiftung Interkultur shows that "Muslims who take religion seriously express the view that religion demands 'respect for nature' which then prompts them to actions in their everyday lives."¹²

Conclusion

The U.A.E. is the most cosmopolitan and Westernized country in the Middle East. Dubai is positioned as an economic center for the Gulf area. It is also a popular holiday destination for tourists. This region has much to offer in terms of a lifestyle and career development. With a history of both political and social stability there is no wonder that a large and skilled multicultural workforce has settled here. The absence of a bureaucratic approach to business is another attractor. Dubai offers some of the best financial incentives offered anywhere in the world. The sophisticated lifestyle and safe conditions make this an ideal location for both the workers and businesses alike.

21st Century economic expansion has transformed the once traditional culture into a multicultural tapestry. The mix of traditional and modern and of Eastern and Western cultures has made working and doing business in Dubai a one-of-a-kind experience.

Notes

- ¹ Adele M. Hayutin, "How Population Aging Differs Across Countries: A Briefing on Global Demographics," Stanford Center on Longevity, March 2007.
- ² "World Economic Outlook 2011," International Monetary Fund, 2011 <<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2010/02/pdf/c2.pdf>, (accessed May 2011).
- ³ Louda Mattar interview, February 16, 2011.
- ⁴ "UAE most favoured location for ME head office," Emirates 24/7, October 6, 2010, <<http://www.emirates247.com/business/economy-finance/uae-most-favoured-location-for-me-head-office-2010-10-06-1.300431>> (accessed May 2011).
- ⁵ Jim Krane, *City of Gold*, St. Martin's Press, 2009, p. 253.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 254.
- ⁷ Louda Mattar interview with HMI.
- ⁸ Jennie Stallings interview, March 24, 2011.
- ⁹ Liz Alderman, "Dubai Faces Environmental Problems After Growth," New York Times, October 27, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/28/business/energy-environment/28dubai.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=1&adxnnlx=1302105650-AysffyBv2u+zsVsKWdTinQ> (accessed May 2011).
- ¹⁰ Gerard Hope, "Dubai Chamber bags LEED certification," ConstructionWeekOnline.com, February 22, 2010, <<http://www.constructionweekonline.com/article-7679-dubai-chamber-bags-leed-certification/>> (accessed May 2011).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Erin Güvercin, "Eco-Islam," Common Ground News Service, 19 May 2009, <<http://www.commongroundnews.org/article.php?id=25527&lan=en&sp=0>> (accessed May 2011).