Analysis Study of Culture's Impact on E-Readiness Assessments in Developing Countries

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Abstract

Nowadays the world is witnessing huge and rapid developments in Information and Communication Technology [ICT] systems which can affect all aspects of our daily lives. Therefore, no country in the world can live in an environment isolated from the rest of the world.

This paper aims to review some of the existing cultural factors, to identify their impact on the e-readiness process in the Developing Countries, and to discuss to what extent they can really fulfill their intention in acting and helping to build blocks of an e-readiness assessment framework as guiding tools in the successful introduction and implementation of eReadiness. Based on this discussion, the paper presents these blocks - categorized into eight factors which cover some important cultural issues that should be addressed when setting an appraisal framework of eReadiness success in Saudi Arabia as developing County.

These factors ware designed to seek information related to the influence of Saudi culture on the adoption of ICT systems. Eight questions sought information related to business language, communication language, culture and ICT R&D, support of the Saudi Arabia government of production development, consistency of Internet with local culture, openness of the culture of the country to foreign influence, the impact of employees' culture on their work, ICT and the protection of Saudi culture.

Researchers are conducting survey and 30 interviews to collect data for this study. Descriptive statistical methods are used to find the means, percentages to find the differences between the public and private sectors.

Keywords: Culture, E-Readiness, Information and Communication Ttechnology (ICT).

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that Internet creates new opportunities for public and private sectors. There are 300 million Arabic speakers in the world and Arabic is ranked sixth in terms of usage, but nevertheless, Arabic websites form less than 1% of the total.[Dutta and Coury 2003]

Culture generally refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and importance. Cultures can be "understood as systems of symbols and meanings that even their creators contest, that lack fixed boundaries, that are constantly in flux, and that interact and compete with one another".

The Saudi government is taking steps to overcome language barriers and has contracted foreign companies to develop new applications and websites for government departments. By the end of 2002, it had spent about $2270 million on training staff. In addition, it is encouraging the private sector and free market to participate in software development in the country. The government has also hosted numerous ICT, e-commerce and governance conferences over the last few years, [Al-Maliki 2005].

[Shafi 2002; Burkhart 1998] both noted that Saudi Arabia has had an Internet connection since 1994 when the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre (KFSHRC) established a satellite link to Bethesda, Maryland, via the International Medical and Educational Data link (IMED). The Washington co-ordinating centre managed the connection and Saudi Internet infrastructure as well as hosting the official Saudi government website in the United States.

In 1995, Saudi Arabia transferred to GulfNet and to the Internet Protocol to create the Information Super Highway connecting academic institutions, research centres, hospitals and public libraries [Shafi 2002].
On the 4th of March 1997, after a long period of discussions and consultations within the Saudi authorities, the Saudi Government approved a resolution giving the co-ordination, introduction and management of initial Internet services to King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) [Shafi 2002; Al-Furaih 2002]. This authorized the provision of service under certain controls and was aimed to make it available to

customers in order that they might benefit from the great potential of the Internet, while the same time, protecting the values and Islamic beliefs of Saudi Society.

This is related to the fact that the Saudi society is a conservative society and people worry that the misuse of the technology could affect their religious and cultural values. The diffusion of the new technology, especially the Internet, might take some time to penetrate throughout the society.

The Internet service was made available to the general public in 1999 through domestic services although some regulations were put in place to restrict Internet use. One of the most important of those regulations was the introduction of content censorship on Internet contents on a national scale. The idea was to block access to non-acceptable sites; those which conflict with the religious, cultural, legal and traditional values of Saudi society [Shafi 2002].

[Choucri et al 2003; Ives and Jarvenpaa 1991; Shore and Venkatachalam 1995; Dean et al 1997; Palvia 1998] have studied the relationship between the 'national culture' of a nation and ICT. They also emphasised the importance of culture to the success of ICT. Other researchers such as [Hasan and Ditsa1999; Tricker 1988] conducted multinational surveys and concluded that there is a link between culture and ICT.

[Levitt 1983] predicted a global 'coming together', a convergence and eventual elimination of distinct cultures based upon improvements in communications and increases in global trade.

The author has been explored issues which related to culture. More specifically, the researcher has been investigated the crucial factors of cultures in developing countries which have impact on development and the use of ICT implementations. Moreover, this study comes to analyse cultures' issues and the use of ICT in Saudi Arabia.

2. Methodology

This survey and interview are part of evaluating and improving e-readiness assessment tools. In order to design and test alternative e-readiness model, the researcher collected live data from public and private Saudi organizations rather than using published data from the international organizations e.g. the World Bank [Rizk 2004]. Therefore, 200 questionnaires were distributed to Saudi organizations across Saudi Arabia.

The framework which has been developed for use in this study has been specifically designed to meet the needs of developing countries, particularly Arab nations, which have not been well covered in previous e-readiness assessment studies. Framework developed for this research to investigate the cultural impact on eReadiness assessments in order to develop the comprehensive e-readiness assessment tool for developing countries. The selected cultural factors cover a wide range of aspects regarding e-readiness assessments in developing countries.

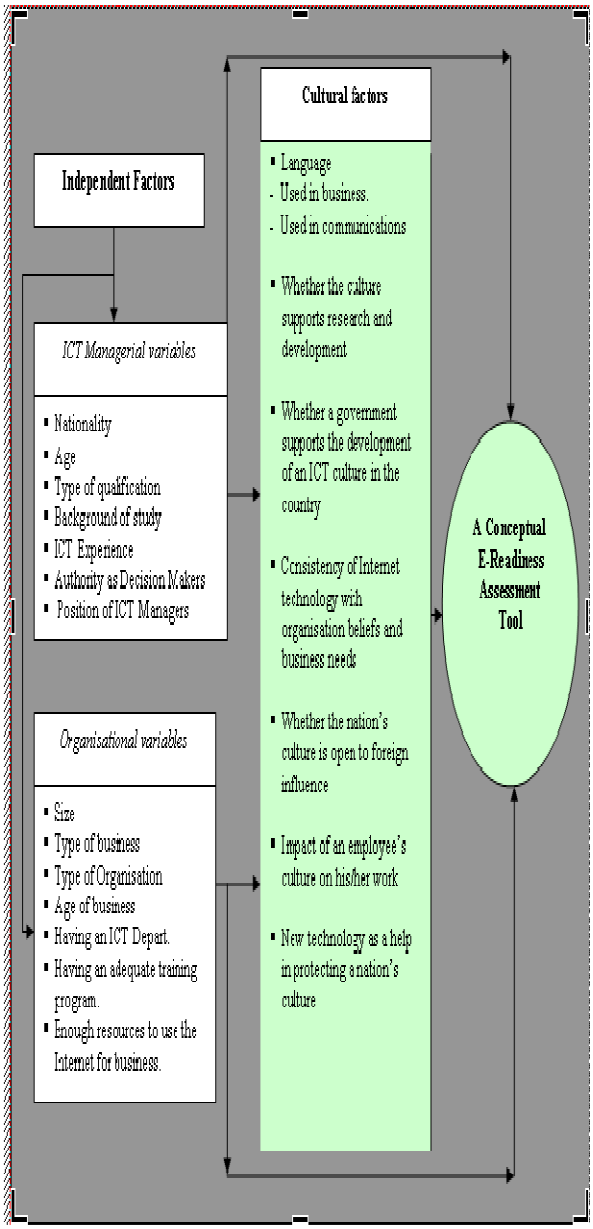

Figure 1. Study framework

A total of 87 organizations (48 public and 39 private sectors) responded. The selected samples include small, medium and large organizations and their daily activities were found to include healthcare organizations and others in order to assess level of

e-readiness for whole country. As a result, the researcher designed 6 cultural questions to cover contribute to design an alternative e-readiness assessment tool (Al Kinani A., Mayhew, P. 2006). These questions were answered by all ICT managers who are working as executive mangers or decision makers in their organizations.

From the literature studies have shown, culture is in an important factor for any e-assessment framework. In this paper, the issues that have been considered to reflect the impact of culture on ICT are:

1. Language used in daily business
2. Language used in daily communications
3. Whether the culture supports research and development
4. Whether a government supports the development of an ICT culture in the country
5. Consistency of Internet technology with organisation beliefs and business needs
6. Whether the nation's culture is open to foreign influence
7. Impact of an employee's culture on his/her work
8. New technology as a help in protecting a nation's culture

3. Data Analysis

The design of the questionnaire was distributed to 200 small, medium and large organisations in both the private and the public sectors in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A total of 87 organisations completed and returned the questionnaire (i.e. the return rate = 42%). The reasons that not all the surveyed organizations responded positively could be related to the fact that the ICT managers are too busy and reluctant to co-operate in this study. Moreover, the researcher believes that they are not familiar with this type of research, and they might also feel that highlighting their organizations' weaknesses could affect their future promotion.

Descriptive statistical methods are used to find the means, percentages to find the differences between the public and private sectors.

Culture is a very important factor in determining the e-readiness of any country. Language, national heritage and beliefs constitute an important part of any nation's life. Eight questions were designed to investigate the impact of this issue on the ICT field in Saudi organisations.

3.1 Language Used in daily business

Question 1: Which of the following languages is used as the official business language at work?
1- Arabic ( ) 2- English ( ) 3- Other ( )

Result shows that Arabic and English are the main languages that are being used in Saudi business organisations. However, Arabic is taking the lead in business activities. It also shows that 60% of public sector organisations are using Arabic as the main language in their business compared to 40% of private sector organisations. This was expected since the official language of Saudi public sector organisations is Arabic. Moreover, public sector business activities are mainly internal activities (within Saudi society). The result shows that 51.8% of the public organisations and 48.2% of the private are using English in their business activities. In the private sector, slightly more companies are using English as the official business language. This is because of their external business activities. Many do business with foreign companies where English is used as a common language. There is therefore no great difference between the local language and English since the majority of the software; websites, etc are written in English. It is an advantage for any nation to speak, read, write and understand more than its own native language. This helps nations to understand each other and exchanges ideas and experiences in different language.

3.2 Language Used for daily Communication

Question 2: Which of the following Language is used for social communication in general?
1- Arabic ( ) 2- English ( ) 3- Other ( )

Result shows that 57.9% of the public sector organisations and 42.1% of the private sector organisations use Arabic in their social communications. The result also shows that 40% of the public organisations and 60% of the private organisations use English in their social communications while 57.1% of the public organisations and 42.9% of the private organisations use other languages such as French or Urdu. It can be said that the main language used in social communications is Arabic; however, English is also used in some public and private organisation as a communication tool and occasionally other languages as well.

3.3 The role of culture in supporting R&D

Question 3: Does the culture & working culture in the ICT industry in Saudi Arabia support Research and Development (R&D)?
1- Very supportive ( ) 2- Fairly supportive ( ) 3- Below the demand ( ) 4- Not at all ( )

This question was designed to investigate the role of culture and working culture in the ICT industry to support Research and Development (R&D) in Saudi Arabia. The results indicate that the culture and

working culture slightly support R&D in the ICT field. This point needs to be investigated in further studies. Cultural factors, which include values, beliefs, heritage values and religion, are very important and all have an impact on employees. This could affect their attitude towards the adoption of ICT. It is clear from the result that there is slight difference between the responses of both public and private sector organisations.

3.4 Whether government supports the development of an ICT culture in the country.

Question 4: Does the government support the development of an ICT culture in your country?
1- Very supportive ( ) 2- Fairly supportive ( ) 3- Below the demand ( ) 4- Not at all ( )
Results show that the general views of the respondents to this question are (23% very supportive, 34% fairly supportive, 43.7% a little supportive and 2.3% not at all). This result shows that 43.7% of the managers surveyed believed that their government has little support for the development of an ICT culture in the country. This point indicates that Saudi Arabia as a developing country cannot satisfy the local ICT requirements and more support should be provided to the Saudi organisations.

3.5 Internet support for organisation's culture

Question 5: Is Internet technology consistent with your organisation's values, beliefs and business needs?
1- Yes ( ) 2- No ( )
Majority (74.7%) of the surveyed organisations believe that Internet technology is consistent with their values, beliefs and culture. This means that Internet technology supports local culture.

The result indicates that society is willing to accept new technology and this will have a positive impact on an e-readiness assessment. When the researcher conducted his interviews, two of the interviewee said, "We believe that

Internet technology might help much any conservative society such as Saudi Arabia.

While women are not allowed to drive a car, this technology might help them to do shopping online or work at home." From the results, the researcher believes that most of the surveyed organisations encouraged the use of the Internet and believed that it would help their business and support their values. For these reasons, the researcher chose this variable to be studied in the new tool to measure its impact on the e-readiness assessment.

3.6 Whether the nation's culture is open to foreign influence

Question 6: The culture of your country is open to foreign influence.
1-Strongly agree ( ) 2- Agree ( ) 3- Neutral ( ) 4- Disagree ( ) 5- Strongly disagree ( )
This question was designed to seek information from the ICT managers as to whether society accepts new themes and ideas (e.g. cultural interaction, anything related to the new technology e.g. videophones, Internet etc.) from foreign countries. As the survey was conducted in Saudi Arabia, the results shown relate specifically to that country. There is some division of opinion over this with 21.8% and 33.3% 'disagreeing' and 'strongly disagreeing' respectively but a large percentage 19.5% and 14.9% 'Strongly agree' and 'agree' respectively. It can be said that Saudi culture is less likely to be open to foreign influence. This is related to the fact that culture is an important part of any nation's life and carries its values, heritage, religion, etc. Therefore, it is difficult to change it, although, it could interact with other cultures.

3.7 Impact of an employee's culture.

Question 7: To what extent is there the impact of an employee's culture on his/her work?
1-Low ( ) 2-Medium ( ) 4-Good ( )
5-Very good ( )
This question was designed to investigate to what extent his/ her employee's culture has a positive impact on his/her work to study if this variable affects the e-readiness assessment. The results indicate that 50.6% of respondents believe that the culture of employee has medium impact on his/her work. The respondents indicated that the employee's culture might be a very good influence if an employee was working in his/her country e.g. the culture of Saudi employees, could have a good impact on their work in Saudi organisations but when they work abroad this might be a disadvantage.

3.8 Protection of local Culture

Question 8: To what extent do new technologies and Internet use help to protect the culture of your country?
1-Low ( ) 2- Medium ( ) 3-Good ( ) 4- V. good ( ) 5-High ( )
This question was designed to investigate to what extent new technologies help in protecting a nation's culture. In other words it means how the new technology, in particular the Internet, helps and supports local culture. This variable shows the extent of people's thinking towards electronic

preparedness, which helps to improve the overall e-readiness of a country. As the survey was conducted in Saudi Arabia, the results shown below relate specifically to that country. The results indicate that the majority of the surveyed organisations believe that the new technologies and the Internet could help in protecting Saudi culture. From conversations while interviewing the managers, the researcher learnt that the ways in which they believe the Internet can protect Saudi Culture largely relate to its impact on the restricted lives of women in the country. As they are not allowed to drive, to travel unaccompanied etc., they will be able to use the Internet to obtain a variety of services without leaving their homes. The Internet can also be used to promote religious observance and reinforce the message of Holy Quran and through the use of e-mails, chat rooms and to help extended families to keep in touch, which is an essential feature of the culture of the country. The researcher believes that this result could encourage the diffusion of ICT systems in Saudi society. the results show that the managers both agree in principle that the new technology and the Internet do protect Saudi culture. The researcher feels that the investigation of this issue could affect an e-readiness assessment and decided to include this variable to the new e-readiness tool.

4. Results and Discussion

This factor was designed to seek information related to the influence of Saudi culture on the adoption of ICT systems. Eight questions sought information related to business language, communication language, culture and ICT R&D, support of the Saudi Arabia government of production development, consistency of Internet with local culture, openness of the culture of the country to foreign influence, the impact of employees' culture on their work, ICT and the protection of Saudi culture.

The study has revealed the following findings about the use of Arabic as an official business and communication language: 87.5% of the public organisations surveyed use Arabic in their daily business activities compared to 71.8% of the private organisations surveyed. However, 60.4% of the public organisations surveyed and 69.2% of the private organisations surveyed were also found to use English in their business activities. These results are as expected since Arabic is the official language in Saudi Arabia and English is most often used in communications with the foreign companies.

As far as communications are concerned the study has found that 91.67% of the public organisations surveyed and 82.05% of the private organisations surveyed use Arabic, and 16.67% of the public organisations surveyed and 30.76 of the private organisations surveyed use English as a tool in their daily communications. The results also revealed that 8.33% of the public organisations surveyed and 7.69% of the private organisations surveyed use other languages such as French or Urdu. Arabic is obviously the main language being used in business and communications but some organisations from both public and private sectors use English as well, and a few use other languages too.

The role of culture and working in the ICT industry to support R&D in Saudi Arabia was also investigated. The study revealed that the organisations surveyed believe that culture and the working environment support the R&D field. This could be related to the fact that the government has started to encourage scientific research and enough money has been allocated. For this purpose, for example, the Dean of the Medical College (King Khalid University) said that the Saudi Arabian Basic Industrial Companies (SABIC) gave King Khalid University an endowment for the Pharmacy College to complete some research related to pharmaceuticals.

The study also found that 74.7% of the organisations surveyed believe that there is a consistency between Internet technology and the organisations' values, beliefs and culture, and business needs. This indicates that Internet technology is not unwelcome in their organisations, but the study also found (views of both public and private organisations) that the Saudi culture could be unlikely to be open to foreign influences. This could be related to the fact that Saudi society is conservative and it might be fears about the negative impact of the Internet on their culture. The interviewees also highlighted this point, however they asserted that if there are enough regulations on how to use the Internet, then it will become a vital and positive factor.

Another finding suggested that the employees' background, previous work experience and way of life have an impact on his/her work. The majority of the organisations surveyed, both public and private sector organisations, believe that the new technology and the Internet may help to protect Saudi culture and values, for example, use of the Internet for education and shopping means that the separation of the sexes required by Saudi culture (Islam religion) will be upheld, but women will be able to take part more often in the outside world via their computers.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

It has been found that the Saudi culture is not open to the foreign influence. This is a very important e-readiness factor since it has a direct influence on the diffusion of the ICT information within the Saudi society. The researcher believes that since the new

technology especially the Internet is a new technology for the Saudi society it is expected that people will be reluctant to use it. The main reasons they fear that this might change their religious and cultural values. The researcher believes that when people understand its usefulness and benefits, they might change their minds. The media and educational establishment in Saudi Arabia should promote the use of the new technology and dissipate the people fear from its use.

This paper concludes that the culture factors have impact on the development for any society; therefore, more efforts should be spent to make the Saudi society a more open society, and also increase the interaction with other societies for their mutual benefits. As a result, the following recommendations are made:

- The government should encourage the media to concentrate on the benefits of ICT systems to Saudi society.
- Learning English should be encouraged since it is an international language, and the majority of ICT systems have been developed in English speaking countries. It is also true that the majority of websites are designed using English.
- The government should establish ICT-oriented social clubs to enhance ICT knowledge in Saudi society.

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Appendix

Table 1: *The majority of employees have basic ICT literacy Skills.*

Crosstab

			Organisation Sector		
			Public	Private	Total
The majority of your organisation employees have basic ICT literacy	Strongly agree	Count	6	7	13
		% within The majority of your organisation employees have basic ICT literacy	46.2%	53.8%	100.0%
	Agree	Count	30	24	54
		% within The majority of your organisation employees have basic ICT literacy	55.6%	44.4%	100.0%
	Neutral	Count	3	3	6
		% within The majority of your organisation employees have basic ICT literacy	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
	Disagree	Count	9	5	14
		% within The majority of your organisation employees have basic ICT literacy	64.3%	35.7%	100.0%
Total		Count	48	39	87
		% within The majority of your organisation employees have basic ICT literacy	55.2%	44.8%	100.0%

Table 2: *The impact of the organisation's social history on the adoption of ICT systems.*

Crosstab

			Organisation Sector		
			Public	Private	Total
The social history of the Saudi organisation is an important factor influencing the ICT adaptation in the Saudi organisations	Strongly agree	Count	4	3	7
		% within The social history of the Saudi organisation is an important factor influencing the ICT adaptation in the Saudi organisations	57.1%	42.9%	100.0%
	Agree	Count	23	9	32
		% within The social history of the Saudi organisation is an important factor influencing the ICT adaptation in the Saudi organisations	71.9%	28.1%	100.0%
	Neutral	Count	15	14	29
		% within The social history of the Saudi organisation is an important factor influencing the ICT adaptation in the Saudi organisations	51.7%	48.3%	100.0%
	Disagree	Count	5	8	13
		% within The social history of the Saudi organisation is an important factor influencing the ICT adaptation in the Saudi organisations	38.5%	61.5%	100.0%
	Strongly disagree	Count	1	5	6
		% within The social history of the Saudi organisation is an important factor influencing the ICT adaptation in the Saudi organisations	16.7%	83.3%	100.0%
Total		Count	48	39	87
		% within The social history of the Saudi organisation is an important factor influencing the ICT adaptation in the Saudi organisations	55.2%	44.8%	100.0%

Table 3: *The role of culture in supporting the ICT R&D industry.*

The culture and working culture in ICT industry in SA support the Research and Developing * Organisation Sector Crosstabulation

			Organisation Sector		
			Public	Private	Total
The culture and working culture in ICT industry in SA support the Research and Developing	Very supportive	Count	2	5	7
		% within The culture and working culture in ICT industry in SA support the Research and Developing	28.6%	71.4%	100.0%
	Fairly supportive	Count	20	13	33
		% within The culture and working culture in ICT industry in SA support the Research and Developing	60.6%	39.4%	100.0%
	Below the demand	Count	20	19	39
		% within The culture and working culture in ICT industry in SA support the Research and Developing	51.3%	48.7%	100.0%
	Not at all	Count	6	2	8
		% within The culture and working culture in ICT industry in SA support the Research and Developing	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	48	39	87
		% within The culture and working culture in ICT industry in SA support the Research and Developing	55.2%	44.8%	100.0%

Table 4: *Whether Saudi government supports the development of an ICT culture*

The Saudi government support the production development of local contents * Organisation Sector Crosstabulation

			Organisation Sector		
			Public	Private	Total
The Saudi government support the production development of local contents	Yes, Very supportive	Count	12	8	20
		% within The Saudi government support the production development of local contents	60.0%	40.0%	100.0%
	Yes, Fairly supportive	Count	12	15	27
		% within The Saudi government support the production development of local contents	44.4%	55.6%	100.0%
	Yes, Only few	Count	22	16	38
		% within The Saudi government support the production development of local contents	57.9%	42.1%	100.0%
	Not at all	Count	2	0	2
		% within The Saudi government support the production development of local contents	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	48	39	87
		% within The Saudi government support the production development of local contents	55.2%	44.8%	100.0%

Table 5: *Consistency of Internet technology with organisations' values, beliefs and business needs.*

Is Internet technology consistent with your organisation's value, beliefs, culture and business needs * Organisation Sector Crosstabulation

			Organisation Sector		
			Public	Private	Total
Is Internet technology consistent with your organisation's value, beliefs, culture and business needs	Yes	Count	33	32	65
		% within Is Internet technology consistent with your organisation's value, beliefs, culture and business needs	50.8%	49.2%	100.0%
	No	Count	6	1	7
		% within Is Internet technology consistent with your organisation's value, beliefs, culture and business needs	85.7%	14.3%	100.0%
	I do not Know	Count	9	6	15
		% within Is Internet technology consistent with your organisation's value, beliefs, culture and business needs	60.0%	40.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	48	39	87
		% within Is Internet technology consistent with your organisation's value, beliefs, culture and business needs	55.2%	44.8%	100.0%

Table 6*: Saudi culture is open to foreign influence*

The saudi culture is opend to the foreign influence. * Organisation Sector Crosstabulation

			Organisation Sector		
			Public	Private	Total
The saudi culture is opend to the foreign influence.	Strongly agree	Count	10	7	17
		% within The saudi culture is opend to the foreign influence.	58.8%	41.2%	100.0%
	Agree	Count	7	6	13
		% within The saudi culture is opend to the foreign influence.	53.8%	46.2%	100.0%
	Neutral	Count	7	2	9
		% within The saudi culture is opend to the foreign influence.	77.8%	22.2%	100.0%
	disagree	Count	9	10	19
		% within The saudi culture is opend to the foreign influence.	47.4%	52.6%	100.0%
	Strongly disagree	Count	15	14	29
		% within The saudi culture is opend to the foreign influence.	51.7%	48.3%	100.0%
Total		Count	48	39	87
		% within The saudi culture is opend to the foreign influence.	55.2%	44.8%	100.0%

Table 7*: Investigate the level of the positive impact of an employee's cultural on his/her work*

An employee's culture impacts on his/her work * Organisation Sector Crosstabulation

			Organisation Sector		
			Public	Private	Total
An employee's culture impacts on his/her work	Low	Count	6	5	11
		% within An employee's culture impacts on his/her work	54.5%	45.5%	100.0%
	Meduem	Count	27	17	44
		% within An employee's culture impacts on his/her work	61.4%	38.6%	100.0%
	Good	Count	10	11	21
		% within An employee's culture impacts on his/her work	47.6%	52.4%	100.0%
	Very good	Count	5	6	11
		% within An employee's culture impacts on his/her work	45.5%	54.5%	100.0%
Total		Count	48	39	87
		% within An employee's culture impacts on his/her work	55.2%	44.8%	100.0%

Table 8: *New technologies and Internet help to protect Saudi culture*

lew technologies and Internet usages help to protect the Saudi culture. * Organisation Secto Crosstabulation

			Organisation Sector		
			Public	Private	Total
New technologies and Internet usages help to protect the Saudi culture.	Low	Count	3	0	3
		% within New technologie and Internet usages help t protect the Saudi culture.	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
	Meduem	Count	8	5	13
		% within New technologie and Internet usages help t protect the Saudi culture.	61.5%	38.5%	100.0%
	good	Count	10	5	15
		% within New technologie and Internet usages help t protect the Saudi culture.	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
	Very good	Count	13	16	29
		% within New technologie and Internet usages help t protect the Saudi culture.	44.8%	55.2%	100.0%
	High	Count	14	13	27
		% within New technologie and Internet usages help t protect the Saudi culture.	51.9%	48.1%	100.0%
Total		Count	48	39	87
		% within New technologie and Internet usages help t protect the Saudi culture.	55.2%	44.8%	100.0%

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