

A qualitative study of diversity management practices in Iran's private sector organizations

Diversity
management
practices

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine diversity management (DM) practices in leading private-sector organizations in Iran.

Design/methodology/approach – The study draws on in-depth interviews with 23 human resource management (HRM) executives and supervisors in nine private sector companies in Iran, and presents the analysis conducted using MAXQDA software.

Findings – The results categorize DM practices into four subsystems of HRM, i.e. recruitment and selection, training, performance management, and reward management. These practices indicate the inclusion of diversity-sensitive criteria and consideration of equal opportunity in the HRM subsystems.

Originality/value – The findings advance a contextual understanding of DM in a developing country. Considering DM practices in HRM subsystems may provide an effective way to help managers address workforce diversity in organizations.

Keywords Diversity management, Equality, Human resource management, Qualitative research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In past two decades, diversity management (DM) has received an increasing attention among management researchers and practitioners because of societal and global changes such as migration, legislation, activism and organizational attempts to achieve a competitive advantage (D'Netto *et al.*, 2014; Nkomo *et al.*, 2019). Workforce diversity, arguably, offers several advantages including attracting talent and increasing innovation. However, if not managed effectively, it can pose challenges such as increased conflict and miscommunication (D'Netto *et al.*, 2014; Ghasempour Ganji *et al.*, 2021). Effective DM programs may enable organizations to take advantage of workforce diversity and reduce its adverse consequences (Shen *et al.*, 2009; Yadav and Lenka, 2020). Diversity is more likely to lead to positive performance outcomes when human resource (HR) practices focus on transforming diversity into an advantage (Kochan *et al.*, 2003; Tatli *et al.*, 2017). An attention to diversity in HR subsystems, such as recruitment, appraisal, rewards and training, may increase equal opportunity, inclusion and creativity at work (Goodman *et al.*, 2003; Kochan *et al.*, 2003; Kundu *et al.*, 2019). Thus, it is important for organizations to know the ways in which they can address DM practices in their HR subsystems.

The DM discourse originated in North America (Dimovski *et al.*, 2019), and most of the research in this field has been conducted in Western and developed countries (e.g. Cornet and Zaroni, 2010; Hajajra *et al.*, 2021; McDonald, 2010). Relatively less scholarly attention has



been paid to DM in developing countries (e.g. [Edewor et al., 2014](#); [Kabara et al., 2022](#)). There are, indeed, concerns about the relevance of Western conceptualization and approaches to DM in nonWestern countries ([Klarsfeld et al., 2019](#); [Syed, 2008a](#)). As evidenced by previous research, issues of diversity and discrimination are complex, and are shaped by historical, political and socioeconomic circumstances ([Ozturk et al., 2015](#); [Sawyer and Thoroughgood, 2012](#); [Syed, 2008b](#); [Syed and Özbilgin, 2009](#); [Syed et al., 2010](#)). Thus, there is a need for contextual studies to develop a better understanding of the conceptualization of DM in different sociocultural environments ([Shen et al., 2009](#)).

Moreover, according to [Yadav and Lenka \(2020\)](#), most of the studies in the field of DM are quantitative (49.60%), and conceptual (23.57%), while less than 9% of the studies have used qualitative methodology. This is barring a few exceptions such as [Hennekam et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Soltani et al. \(2012\)](#). [Triana et al. \(2021\)](#) call for more in-depth research to examine the efficacy of various HR practices in reducing discrimination. The present study seeks to address these research gaps by qualitatively examining DM in HR subsystems among high-performing companies in the private sector in a developing, Muslim majority country in Asia, i.e. Iran.

The demand for highly skilled HR in developed countries has posed a significant challenge in developing countries due to the high rate of brain drain ([Azadi et al., 2020](#)). Such a high brain drain rate shows that there are gaps and issues in the current organizational approaches to managing HR and diversity ([Javidan and Dastmalchian, 2003](#); [Soltani, 2010](#)). Research suggests that the lack of attention to diversity and equality may lead to higher rates of women's and minorities' immigration ([Beyraghi and Soklaridis, 2019](#); [Docquier et al., 2009](#)). [Docquier et al. \(2009\)](#) suggest that the emigration rates of highly skilled women are approximately 17% higher than those for comparably educated men.

Paying attention to DM in Iran is especially important as Iran has a diverse population in terms of ethnicity, religion, gender, age, etc. This diversity is also manifested in organizations in the shape of a diverse workforce. There is a lack of equal opportunity laws in Iran, and a lack of commitment to equal opportunity by companies does not lead to any legal implications or penalties ([Soltani, 2010](#)). Learning from diversity practices of the Iranian organizations that consider DM in their policies and practices may motivate others to consider diversity and equality initiatives at work. Moreover, as the Iranian government seeks to diversify its economy and decrease its reliance on oil and gas revenues ([Soltani, 2010](#)), paying attention to skilled and diverse HR may be a key opportunity for social and economic development.

The present study aims to examine DM practices in HR subsystems in the private sector in Iran. The paper is organized as follows. In the literature review section, first, we review the DM literature, followed by a brief review of the research context (Iran). In the methodology section, we explain the research population and sampling method, and data gathering and analysis procedures. Then, we report the key research findings, followed by theoretical and practical contributions of the research, and suggestions for further research.

Literature review

Diversity and its management

Diversity is defined as all the differences, such as ethnicity, religion, disability, gender and age that make everyone a unique person ([Edwin, 2001](#)). Diversity is usually divided into two categories of tangible diversity (including gender, ethnicity, age and physical ability) and intangible diversity (including formal educational backgrounds, geographic location, income, beliefs, marital status, work experience and position) ([Jabbour et al., 2011](#)). The current study considers four dimensions of diversity, i.e. gender, age, ethnicity and religion since these dimensions are particularly relevant and challenging in the Iranian context.

Sayers (2012) defines DM as a range of management practices and measures aimed to manage a diverse workforce to enhance employee productivity, cohesion and inclusion in the workplace. DM pertains to accepting, respecting and valuing individual differences (Lumadi, 2008). DM refers to organizational actions to create and maximize the benefits of HR diversity to achieve organizational goals (Çalışkan and Esen, 2019; Yang and Konrad, 2011). The present study considers DM as a managerial practice, to create and maximize the benefits of workforce diversity to achieve organizational goals.

DM practices

The notion of diversity is defined differently based on diverse cultural contexts (Sawyer and Thoroughgood, 2012). Cox (1991) refers to arrangements in work, education and training, career management, and mentoring as diversity activities in the United States (US) organizations. Morrison (1992) identifies accountability, career development and recruitment as key diversity initiatives. A US government study suggests that key DM practices include human resource management (HRM) commitment, diversity as part of the organization's strategic plan, performance-related diversity, evaluation, inspection, succession planning, recruitment, employee engagement and diversity training (Kreitz, 2008). Shen *et al.* (2009) proposed a framework for workforce DM that includes HR practices at three levels, i.e. the strategic level (HR strategy for valuing diversity, formalizing HR policies, measuring and accounting for HR), the technical level (recruitment, training and development, evaluation, and reward), and operational level (training, networking, flexible employment and support for work-life balance). De Beer *et al.* (2011) refers to the following elements of a diversity enabling culture, i.e. diversity training initiatives, leadership, sustainability, employee involvement, setting goals and objectives, respect recognition and acceptance of the differences.

Alcázar *et al.* (2013) refers to several HR strategies crucial for managing workforce diversity including equal opportunity, flexible working hours, work-family balance, collaborative performance evaluation, cross-cultural training and flexible service compensation. Konrad *et al.* (2016) refer to DM practices in terms of diversity training and development, selecting a diverse workforce, and providing work-life flexibility.

Gajjar and Okumus (2018) refer to the best practices reported by leaders of DM in the hospitality and tourism industry and point towards the following practices: corporate diversity councils, diversity training programs, supplier diversity, employee mentoring and networking, cultural awareness, support for women, and same-sex benefits. Kundu *et al.* (2019) investigated the effect of diversity-focused HR practices in the Indian industry, considering DM practices in four HR functions namely: recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, and compensation.

Overall, to our knowledge, studies in the field of DM practices are generally descriptive in nature, using literature review, conceptual model or quantitative research (e.g. Ghasempour Ganji *et al.*, 2021; Koellen, 2021; Manoharan and Singal, 2017). As highlighted by Kundu *et al.* (2015), DM practices are rarely studied in depth. Yet, DM is at the heart of HR policies and subfunctions (Kundu *et al.*, 2015; Shen *et al.*, 2009), and merits deeper investigation (Triana *et al.*, 2021). However, there is a lack of qualitative studies on DM practices in HRM subsystems in developing countries. Thus, to address this research gap, we use a qualitative approach to examine DM practices in different HRM subsystems in Iran.

Research context

Iran is among the world's oldest major civilizations, with over 83 million people and the 18th largest land area in the world. The country's capital and largest city, Tehran, has a population of 8.6 million (CIA, 2022). Iran is the second richest country in the world in terms of natural gas and

oil reserves. Iran's first parliament was founded in 1906 within a constitutional monarchy. In 1979, Iran was declared an Islamic Republic with a religious constitution (Soltani *et al.*, 2012).

Iran has a diverse population in terms of ethnicity, religion, gender, age, etc. While the majority of Iranians (54%) are Persians (CIA, 2022), 39% belong to ethnic minority groups, such as Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis and Lors (US Institute of Peace, 2013). Despite Persian (Farsi) being the official language of Iran, the press and mass media are allowed to use regional and tribal languages (Soltani *et al.*, 2012). The Constitution mandates full respect for nonIslamic schools such as Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity (which together account for 11% of the population) (Soltani *et al.*, 2012). At least 3% of Iran's residents are foreign nationals and refugees (General Population and Housing Census, 2016). Specifically, in 2020, Iran had 2.6 million undocumented Afghans, 780,000 Afghan refugee card holders, and 20,000 Iraqi refugee card holders. In terms of age diversity, in 2020, 13.36% of the population was 15–24 years old, 48.94% was 25–54 years old and 13.5% was more than 54 years old (CIA, 2022).

Iran's society is generally governed by leadership and management styles based on the government's revolutionary ideals and Islamic principles (Hofstede, 2007; Javidan and Dastmalchian, 2003; Soltani, 2010). Managerial practices in Iran are influenced by religious ideologies embedded in the Iranian culture (House *et al.*, 2004; Javidan and Dastmalchian, 2003). Considering Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, there is high power distance in Iranian society representing itself in an autocratic leadership and a strong directive management approach. Individual interests often take priority over the groups and organization's interests. Moreover, there is a strong desire to avoid uncertainty in the Iranian culture (Soltani *et al.*, 2012).

In terms of diversity and equality management, there is little commitment to equal opportunities in employment in the Iranian labor law, and companies do not face any legal consequences, costs or restrictions owing to their discriminatory practices (Soltani, 2010). There is weak enforcement of any indirect nondiscriminatory provisions of the labor law in Iranian firms (Ladjevardi, 1985; Soltani, 2010). Iran ranked very low, i.e. 143 out of 146 countries, in terms of gender equality (WEF, 2022). Beyraghi and Soklaridis (2019) argue that there is no visible gender quota in recruitment, retention and hiring practices in Iran.

Gupta *et al.* (2002) argue that although there is a high level of government and authoritarian family controls in Iranian organizations, companies lack rule orientation because of unclear and regularly changing rules. Soltani *et al.* (2012) suggest that managers routinely manipulate the law deliberately to suit their own convenience and self-interest. In practice, Soltani *et al.* witnessed no signs of diversity management in their study of construction and brick-making firms. They also mention that managers do not consider diverse workgroups as a source of innovation and better performance.

Research methodology

The present study uses a qualitative approach to explore DM practices in the HR subsystems in Iran. This approach is specifically useful as the extant literature does not explain the topic sufficiently (Glaser, 1978; Leedy and Ormrod, 2005). By using qualitative data, this study seeks to highlight elements of HR systems based on equality and diversity in practices within Iranian companies.

Research population and sampling method

The target population of this study was HR managers and supervisors in top private sector companies in Iran. High-performance companies were focused in this research because such organizations are expected to pay more attention to managing diversity (Armstrong *et al.*, 2010; Hellmér and Lind, 2014). The names of the top performing Iranian companies are

published every year by the industrial management organization, which first categorizes the companies into 5 groups based on the sales volume and then ranks the companies in each category based on other indicators such as market share and growth, company size, profitability, performance and productivity. In this list, private companies are defined as companies that have more than 50% of their shares owned by real and legal persons in the private sector. Sixty-two out of the 100 top companies were the private sector, which formed the current research community.

We used theoretical sampling to collect rich information (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Our sample comprised HR managers and supervisors in Iran's high-performance private companies which:

- (1) Have more than 500 employees and the HR productivity index (the ratio of added value to the cost of manpower) above 4. Organizations with a high number of employees often have diversity in their workforce. Moreover, the HR productivity index shows the appropriateness of HRM in the organization.
- (2) Have a formal DM statement or policy or considering diversity and equality management in their strategic planning.
- (3) At least 30% of their employees are women, at least 10% of their employees have religions other than Shia Islam, at least 30% of their employees are ethnically diverse, and at least 30% percent of their employees are young (between twenty and thirty-five years old).

Moreover, for individual interviewees, we considered the following characteristics: more than 5 years of experience, at least a master's degree in subjects related to management and at least one year of experience in HR or DM. Finally, 23 top HR managers and supervisors of nine private organizations in the fields of banking, insurance, petrochemicals and other industries were selected and interviewed. Table 1 shows the demographic and organizational characteristics of each interviewee.

As shown in Table 1, most of the interviewees ($N = 14$, 60.86%) were male. This may be explained by the contextual fact that female employees are less likely to get managerial and executive positions in Iranian organizations (Gilavand and Mohammadzadeh, 2018; Ramezani *et al.*, 2021). The average age of the interviewees was 42.5 years. Most of the interviewees had a master's degree ($N = 14$, 60.86%). Moreover, the average work experience of the interviewees was 14.5 years. The work experience of interviewees in the field of DM was in the range of 1–4 years, showing that the concept of diversity and equality management is relatively new in Iranian private sector organizations.

Data gathering procedures

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. The interview protocol covered some open-ended questions to get interviewees' free opinion and reduce their stress. Moreover, to lessen ambiguity, the interviewer provided a short description of the topic and the purpose of the research. Next, the main questions were asked. On average, each interview took approximately 40 min.

Interviews were continued and the analysis was done in an iterative fashion until theoretical saturation (Saunders *et al.*, 2018). In the current research, theoretical saturation was reached in interviews with twenty people. However, as a precaution, three more interviews were conducted and analyzed.

To ensure the quality of data analysis, all interviews were recorded by a tape recorder, excluding three interviews in which the interviewees were unwilling to record their voices.

Table 1.
Interviewees' details

SN	Code	Gender	Age	Number of years of experience	DM experience (years)	Degree	Organizational position	Organization code and industry
1	A1	Female	44	12	1	Ph.D. in HRM	Senior Manager of Training	Org 1: Automobile industry
2	A2	Male	32	7	3	MBA	Human Resources Assistant	Org 1: Automobile industry
3	B1	Male	51	16	4	Ph.D. in HRM	Human Resource Manager	Org 2: Banking industry
4	B2	Female	45	10	2	Master in education management	Senior Manager of Training	Org 2: Banking industry
5	B3	Male	46	13	2	Ph.D. in administrative management	Senior Manager of Welfare	Org 2: Banking industry
6	C1	Male	39	10	1	Master in HRM	Human Resource Manager	Org 3: Banking industry
7	C2	Male	48	17	3	Master in financial management	Senior Manager of Performance Evaluation	Org 3: Banking industry
8	D1	Female	35	8	4	Ph.D. in governmental management	Senior Manager of Training	Org 4: Electronic payment industry
9	D2	Female	34	8	1	Master in HRM	Human Resources Assistant	Org 4: Electronic payment industry
10	E1	Male	46	12	2	Master in HRM	Human Resource Manager	Org 5: Banking industry
11	E2	Male	52	28	4	MBA	Senior Manager of Employment	Org 5: Banking industry
12	E3	Male	49	16	3	Master in administrative management	Senior Manager of Welfare	Org 5: Banking industry
13	F1	Female	38	13	3	Ph.D. in educational science	Senior Manager of Training	Org 6: Mineral company
14	F2	Female	44	19	2	Ph.D. in HRM	Human Resources Assistant	Org 6: Mineral company
15	F3	Male	47	18	2	Master in production management	Supervisor	Org 6: Mineral company
16	G1	Male	52	26	2	Master in governmental management	Senior Manager of Training	Org 7: Engineering company
17	G2	Male	38	10	3	Master in administrative management	Supervisor	Org 7: Engineering company
18	G3	Male	50	25	1	Master in administrative management	Senior Manager of Payment and Reward	Org 7: Engineering company
19	H1	Male	44	18	2	Ph.D. in HRM	Senior Manager of Training	Org 8: Financial institution
20	H2	Female	38	13	3	Master in financial management	Senior Manager of Payment and Reward	Org 8: Financial institution
21	I1	Female	40	17	2	Ph.D. in business management	Human Resources Assistant	Org 9: Insurance industry
22	I2	Female	30	8	2	MBA	Senior Manager of Training	Org 9: Insurance industry
23	I3	Male	37	11	3	Ph.D. in HRM	Senior Manager of Performance Evaluation	Org 9: Insurance industry

Source(s): Table by authors

In these three interviews, an effort was made to write down all key points. Each interview was transcribed almost one day after it was recorded by two members of the research team. Then, the transcribed manuscripts were analyzed through a coding process several times by each member of the research team solely. After each interview, there was a minimum interval of one week so that we could review each interview and analyze it.

Data analysis

In this study, MAXQDA software was used to analyze the interview data. MAXQDA is software designed for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods data, text and multimedia analysis with diverse features, including the capability of importing documents, coding, editing, categorizing and linking codes, and visualizing the model (Marjaei *et al.*, 2019). This software is used for analysis of the qualitative studies by following three key steps, i.e. open, selective and theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Firstly, in the open coding phase, we identified codes that emerged from reading the line by line of the interviews (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). These were then grouped and an appropriate name to each group was assigned until the emergence of the core category. The core issue refers to a concept that demonstrates the participants' key insights about the research question. The core concept of this study was named "the best DM practices under HRM systems". With the emergence of the core category of research, the selective coding phase began, and subsequent interviews around this core category were conducted. During the selective coding phase, related open codes were categorized together to make new categories (Hyde and Olesen, 2011). By considering the constant comparison by going back and forth between the levels of coding, each code and category was modified, deleted, merged or elevated to achieve optimal fit. At the theoretical coding stage, the relationships between the lower-level and the higher-level categories were considered (Hyde and Olesen, 2011). Theoretical coding involved a set of abstract patterns that combined the key themes or concepts from the interviews (Glaser and Holton, 2004).

Findings

The interviews highlighted the key DM practices in the HRM system in the Iranian context. The analysis pursued this goal by following three key steps, i.e. open, selective and theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Table 2 offers an overview of major categories, lower-level categories and open codes.

Through the theoretical coding stage, the resulting pattern was placed in "the dimension family" as proposed by Glaser (1978) (Figure 1).

Diversity-sensitive recruitment and selection

The interviews suggest that recruitment and selection based on diversity-sensitive criteria is a key DM measure in HR subsystems. Interviews point towards several interrelated concepts in this category, such as: applying diversity-sensitive criteria in recruitment planning, sourcing, advertising and the selection processes. The hierarchical code-sub-code model retrieved from MAXQDA software is shown in Figure 2. The numbers in parenthesis show the number of times the code was mentioned by interviewees.

Interviewees described the use of diversity-sensitive criteria in recruitment planning by codes such as considering vacancies for minorities in the organization, staff socialization in the form of experimental deployments and lack of attention to tangible diversity characteristics in employment. Two interviewees stated that their hiring policies considered gender and age diversity. However, there was not any quota for employing women or minorities. For example, an interviewee stated:

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Major categories	Lower-level categories	Open codes
Diversity-sensitive recruitment and selection system	Applying diversity-sensitive criteria in recruitment planning	Putting vacancies for minorities in the organization, staff socialization in the form of experimental deployments, lack of weighting to tangible diversity characteristics in employment
	Considering diversity in sourcing and advertising	Using high-accessibility media to insert a recruitment ad; Using a variety of media to insert a recruitment ad
	Considering diversity in the selection process	Presence of minorities on the recruitment and selection committee; recruitment based on competencies; applying similar general criteria for recruitment; defining operational criteria for recruitment; membership of the recruitment committee based on organizational structure rather than individual characteristics
Diversity-sensitive training	Diversity in training courses	Conducting various training courses; Conducting training courses in various ways; Assessing the effectiveness of training courses in various ways
	Equality in training courses	Possibility of training for all staff; providing financial and spiritual support for continuing education for all staff; training courses through training needs assessment; assessing effectiveness of courses equally
	Diversity management training	Cross-cultural training; conflict management courses; training programs to reduce stereotypical views and perceptual errors; other training courses related to diversity management
Diversity-sensitive performance management	Equality in performance evaluation and feedback	Providing feedback to all employees; performance appraisal with similar criteria; performance appraisal based on individual and organizational performance rather than personality traits; performance appraisal based on competency; collaborative performance appraisal; 360-degree performance; quantify (nonjudgmental) performance evaluation criteria; evaluate individual, group/team and organizational aspects of performance; accuracy of performance appraisal system
	Performance evaluation in the field of diversity	performance appraisal of managers in considering diversity management and department performance appraisal in considering diversity management
Diversity-sensitive reward management	Performance-based compensation	Competency-based compensation; personal, organizational and team-based performance compensation; Performance-based incentive compensation
	Fair and flexible compensation	Flexible compensation, inclusion of compensation portfolio; providing various compensation portfolio for everyone
	Equality in remuneration, promotions and incentives policies	Align pay and rewards at different levels of employment; equal promotion opportunities for all employees

Table 2.
Categories and open codes

Source(s): Table by authors

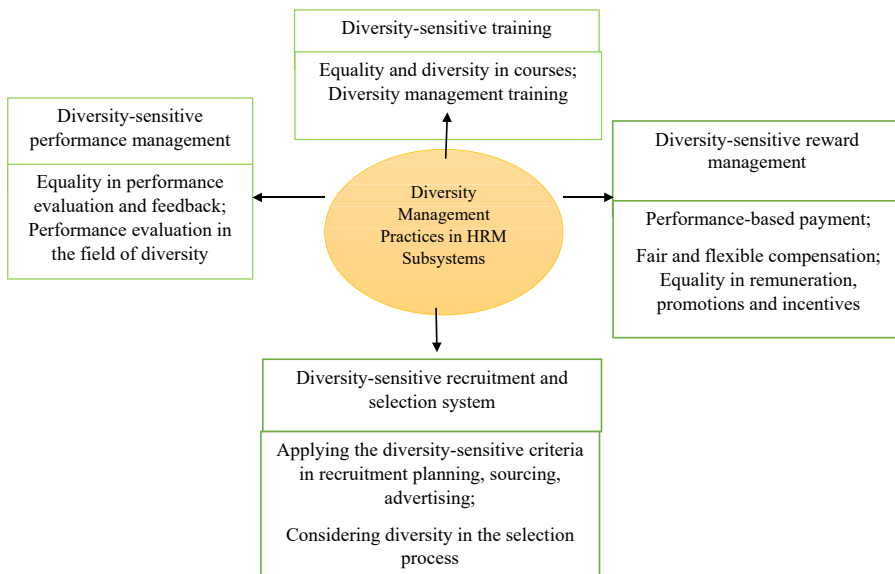


Figure 1.
Diversity management in HRM subsystems

Source(s): Figure by authors

We always have this concern that, in the units dominated by male employees, women should be hired. This is because our customers include both spectrums and we need to add more women to the organization to reach a reasonable ratio (E2)

Although the interviewees generally asserted that their recruitment and selection policies were nondiscriminatory, there seemed to be a reluctance to consider or accept religious diversity. This could be explained by the power of the Islamic regime in Iran. For example, an interviewee stated:

We think religion should not be considered as a criterion. We have no restrictions on the employment of people with different religions and politics. However, in managerial positions, the opinion of organizational authorities is needed, and there are sensitivities towards certain characteristics such as religion, due to political reasons. (E2)

In terms of diversity consciousness in sourcing and advertising, there was a discussion of the use of local accessibility and diverse media for job placement. For example, an interviewee stated:

The site of the organization is important because it targets a large community. Recruitment is done through local newspapers and recruitment institutions to provide the locals with employment information. (D2)

Another interviewee commented on the importance of using the most accessible and diverse media to make it inclusive for the nonusers of the Internet:

In the recruitment process, we try to select the most accessible media that is reachable for the vast number of targeted applicants. For example, we often use employment institutes for those who are not internet users (E2)

There was also discussion of having diverse composition of the recruitment committee based on organizational structure. This may be seen as inclusive of social class diversity. For example, an interviewee stated,

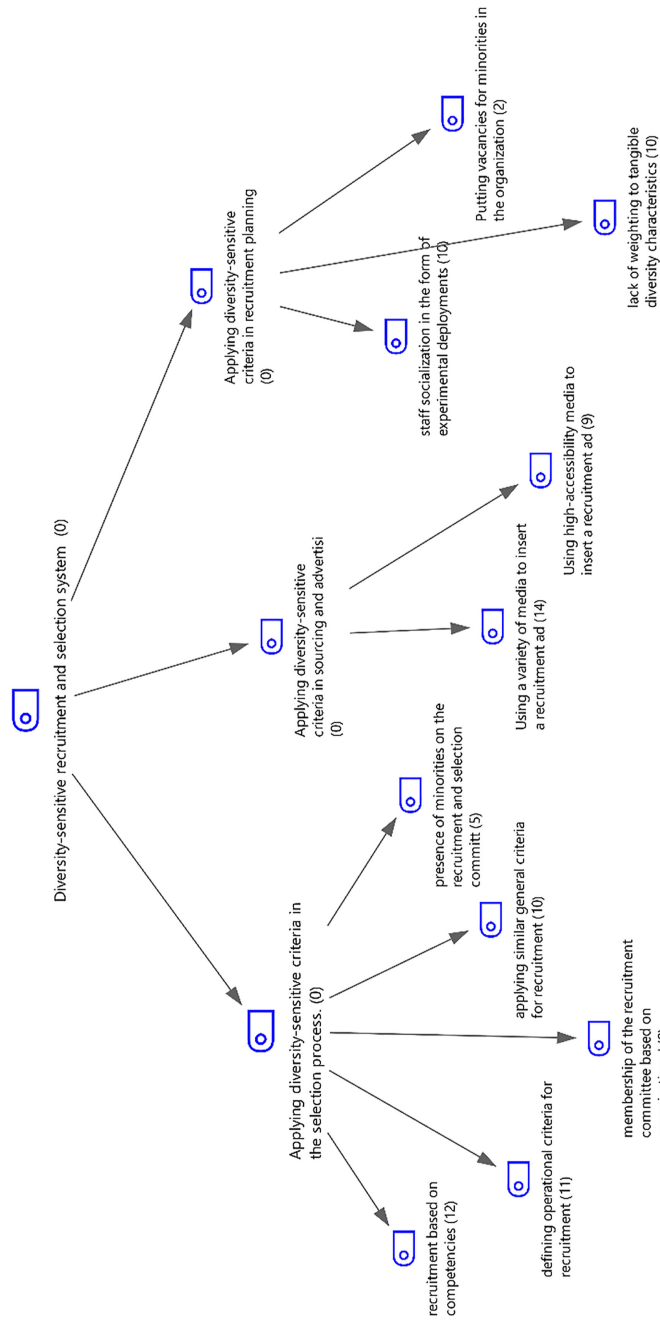


Figure 2. Hierarchical code-sub-code model of diversity-sensitive recruitment and selection system

Source(s): Figure by authors

Membership in employment committee is based on the position, but we try to make a membership from different levels of the organizational structure or hierarchy (I1)

There were also references to uniform recruitment procedures for all individuals. One interviewee thus stated,

It is important to create synergies in administrative procedures. For example, we do not have two different application forms for hiring people if this is an Armenian or some other ethnicity. (A2)

Diversity-sensitive training

DM training was identified as a key element of HRM subsystems. The hierarchical code-sub-code model is shown in [Figure 3](#).

Diversity in training courses includes codes such as variety of training courses, training pedagogies and ways to evaluate training effectiveness. Attention to a variety of training courses implies that training should not only be job-related but also should cover soft areas such as psychology and work-family balance. In high-performance private sector companies in Iran, training courses offered to employees are usually technical in nature. In this regard, an interviewee stated:

Most training courses for production staff are technical courses, we have taken steps in organizing courses on psychology, marketing, economics, and work-family balance to our executives by using a variety of teaching methods, including virtual and in-person lectures (B2)

Another interviewee stated:

All employees undergo in-service training to familiarize themselves with the organizational culture. Courses are offered to enhance skills such as marketing, economics, stress management etc. (F1)

The DM training comprised cross-cultural training, conflict management, training programs to reduce stereotypical views and perceptual errors, etc. For example, an interviewee said:

DM is a key challenge facing our organization. To solve it, we offer culture-based training. We have organized courses on this topic. Conflict management courses, intercultural training courses and something like this. We are also keen to hold courses related to cognitive errors because we believe that some of the conflicts are rooted in these errors. (H1)

Equality in training courses includes codes such as the availability of training for all staff and providing financial and nonfinancial support for continuing education for all employees. For example, an interviewee said:

Our organization is committed to the training of staff and even provides us with loans and grants. And it provides opportunity to all employees. (I2)

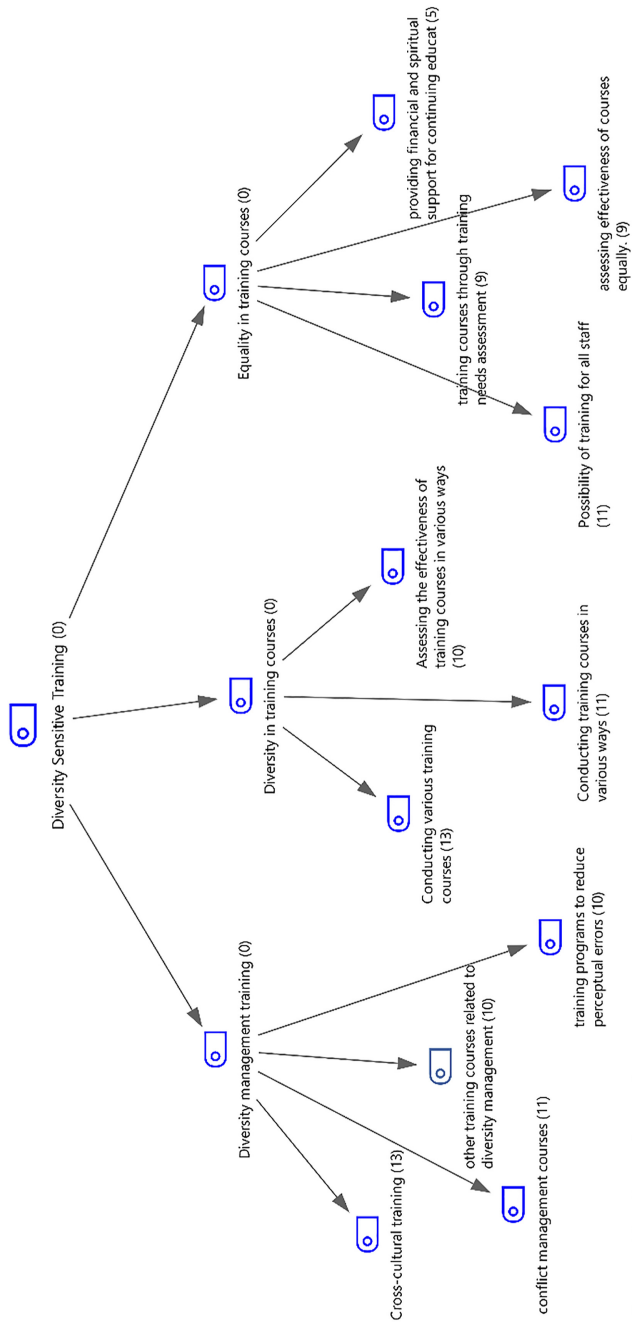
Another interviewee stated:

When we hire, we consider each employees' unique training needs, such as 10015 system, which is used in training planning. (C2)

Diversity-sensitive performance management system

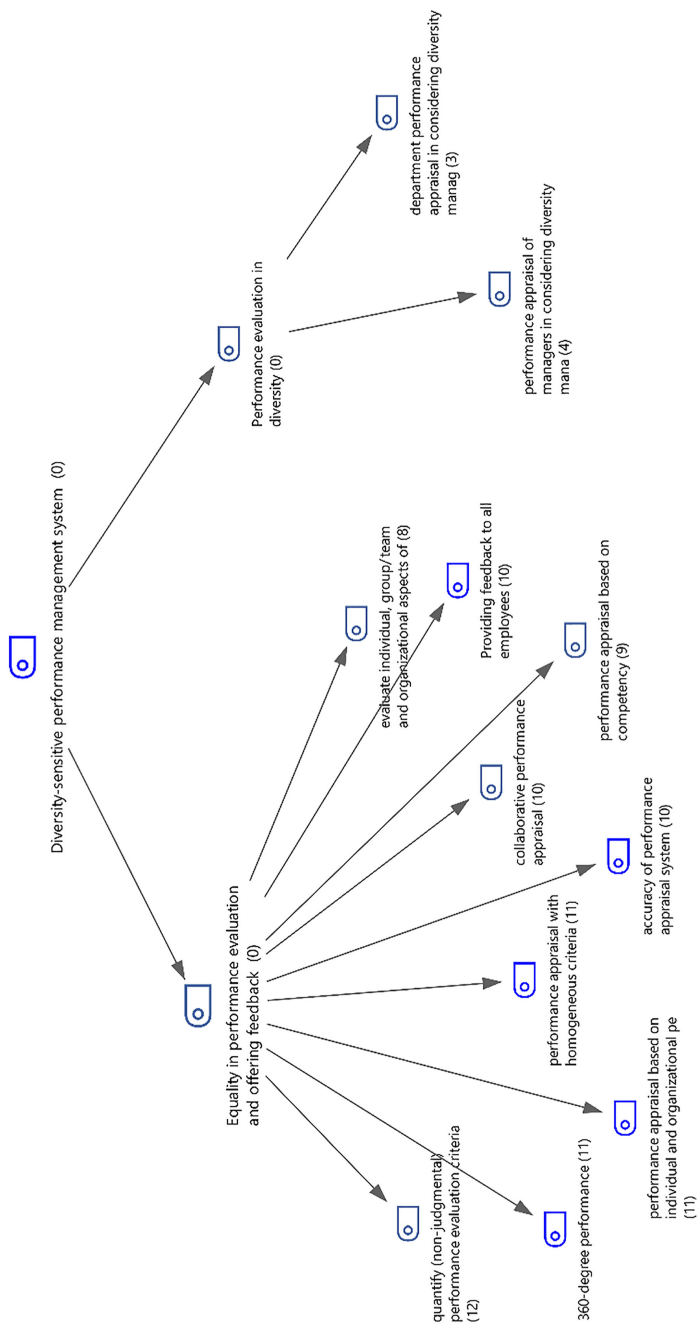
Another DM practice in the HR subsystems pertains to performance management. Interviewees referred to concepts such as equality in performance appraisal, offering feedback and performance appraisal. The hierarchical code-sub-code model is shown in [Figure 4](#).

Equality in performance appraisal included the following elements: providing feedback to all employees, performance appraisal with homogeneous criteria, performance appraisal based on individual and organizational performance rather than personality traits,



Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 3. Hierarchical code-sub-code model of diversity-sensitive training



Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 4. Hierarchical code-subcode model of diversity-sensitive performance management

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performance evaluation based on competency, use of 360-degree performance appraisal system and nonjudgmental performance evaluation criteria.

For example, an interviewee says,

The performance appraisal system of organization is based on employee competency which provides equal field to diverse employees. We insist on providing feedback and do not leave performance evaluation without feedback (G3)

An interviewee emphasized the evaluation of individual, team and organizational performance rather than personality traits and said:

Performance evaluation in our organization is based on individual performance or branch/department performance contributing to organizational performance. The personality traits are not a criterion. (I3)

Performance assessment in diversity included two codes, i.e. managerial and departmental performance appraisal in considering DM. Interviewees suggested that their organizations generally ignored this aspect, or it was in the initial stages. As a somewhat exception, an interviewee stated:

We are considering to reward and promote those managers who pay close attention to recruiting and managing a diverse workforce effectively. However, these policies are not fully documented in our organizations. Specifically, we are at an initial stage, and it is necessary to incorporate them into the rules and procedures. (C1)

Diversity-sensitive reward management

Interviewees referred to concepts such as performance-based compensation, fair and equal compensation, equality in promotions and incentives policies. The hierarchical code-sub-code model is shown in [Figure 5](#).

In terms of performance-based compensation, related codes include competency-based compensation, personal, organizational and team-based performance compensation, and performance-based incentive compensation. An interviewee emphasized the payment based on performance and stated:

We appreciate competency. We define competency as a set of knowledge-skills-attitudes in a particular domain of people. There is not any discrimination based on diversity, and one is paid based on their knowledge, skills, and performance, no matter whether they are female or male or of any age or ethnicity. (C2)

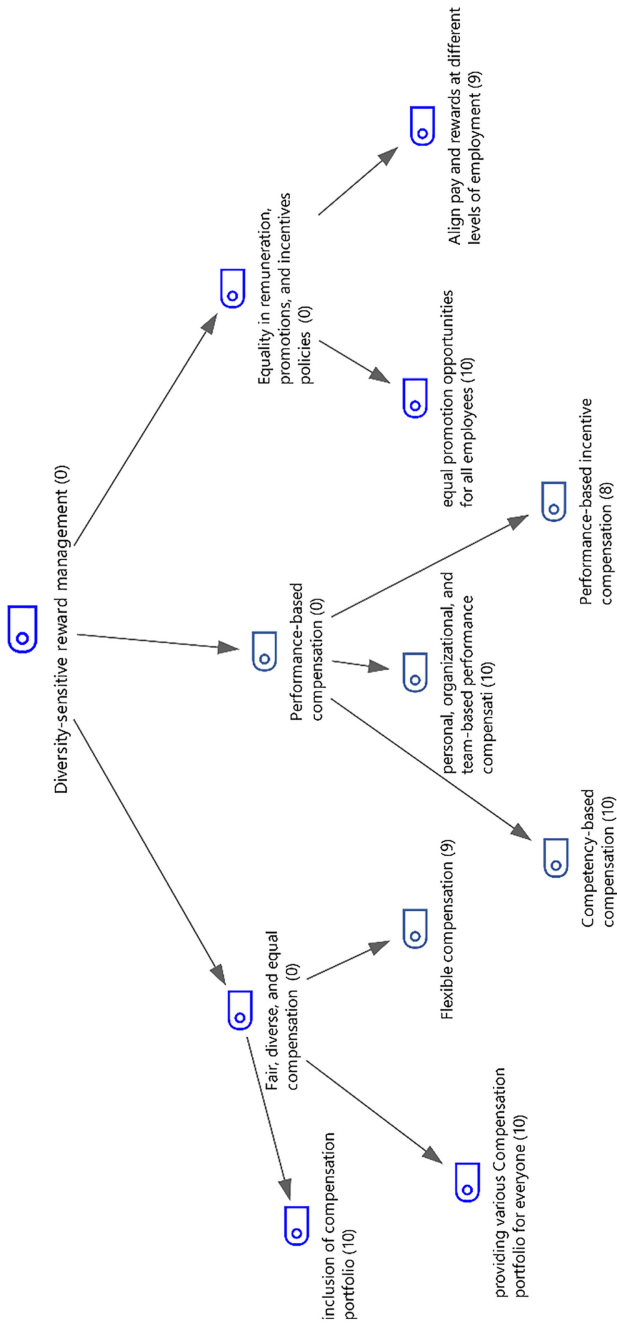
Another interviewee emphasized the importance of performance and stated that:

Performance is considered at a team, individual, or even organizational level. For example, when a branch or department shows high performance, all members are rewarded as a team. In some cases, individuals who show good social or financial performance are compensated too. (B3)

Another interviewee emphasized the importance of having a portfolio of incentives and stated,

Some benefits are offered to everyone, whether they are performing well or not, but in some cases, we offer incentives to high performing employees. When the performance of an individual, group, or team is excellent, we provide cash or non-cash incentives. For example, it may be a promotion, honoring at a ceremony, receiving a salary raise, or a gift. (I3)

The interview analysis points towards codes such as flexible compensation, the inclusion of a compensation portfolio and providing a variety of compensation portfolios for everyone. For example, an interviewee mentioned the inclusion of compensation and the variety of compensation portfolios, stating:



Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 5. Hierarchical code-sub-code model of diversity-sensitive reward management

EDI

We have diverse employees with diverse expectations and preferences. There are various portfolios and options available for staff compensation including financial and non-financial rewards and benefits. Employees have taken advantage of amenities in hotels in different cities, the availability of shopping malls, public place tickets, using internal and external facilities, cash payments, and the like. (B3)

In terms of equality in remuneration, promotions and incentives policies, the primary codes include alignment of pay and rewards at different levels of employment and equal promotion opportunities for all employees. For example, an interviewee emphasized the importance of equal promotion opportunities, stating,

In the last few years, the organization has tried to create equal opportunities for promotion. Individuals are promoted to higher positions based on their abilities. Accordingly, the promotion committee selects the person who is most suitable for the post. (H2)

Fair payment policies included codes such as external equity in pay, internal equity in pay, procedural justice in payment, distributive justice in payment and pay based on job classification schemes. For example, one of the participants stated:

The payment system is effective to secure employees' loyalty and their perception of justice. Employees compare themselves to others in the same and other organizations and if they receive less money, they probably get motivated to leave the organization rather than commit to it. (E1)

Another interviewee referred to the importance of internal equality:

Another important issue is that employees often compare themselves to their colleagues. So, the pay policies must ensure that employees receive an acceptable and equal pay. (F2)

In terms of contractual employment in comparison with regular employment, some staff members think there is no internal equality in organizations. However, as we did not consider the contract types as a diversity criterion in this research, we do not explain this anymore, and acknowledge this as a limitation of the present study.

Finally, the interviewees emphasized the importance of distributive justice and payment based on the job classification scheme. In this regard, an interviewee stated:

Distributive justice in the organization is very important for employees. Whether a payment is commensurate with their performance or not can guarantee that there is justice in the organization. Our organization's policy is to pay individuals based on the job classification scheme, which is a good system for fair payment. (H2)

Discussion

This study has highlighted key DM practices within the HRM subsystems in the private sector organizations in Iran. The diversity-sensitive HRM practices pertain to recruitment and selection, training, performance management, and reward management. As the concept of DM is new in Iranian organizations, this study indicates how organizations in the initial stages of DM can consider such practices in their HRM subsystems. The general approach seems to focus on providing equal opportunity and nondiscriminatory policies instead of considering affirmative or positive action. Moreover, different dimensions of diversity such as age, gender, religion and ethnicity do not receive equal attention in Iranian organizations. Generally, the focus in high-performance private companies in Iran is on age and gender diversity. However, issues of religious diversity and equality seem to be relatively ignored.

A key DM practice highlighted in this study is the recruitment and selection system based on diversity-sensitive criteria including concepts such as applying diversity-sensitive criteria in recruitment planning, sourcing, advertising and the selection process. [Kundu et al. \(2019\)](#)

refer to recruitment and selection practices that include creating equal opportunities for applicants regardless of personal characteristics and backgrounds. Applying diversity-sensitive criteria in recruitment planning means having vacancies for minorities in organizations and staff socialization. However, the code of “staff socialization in the form of experimental deployments”, retrieved from interviews, was not mentioned in the literature previously. The usual method of socialization in the Iranian context is experimental deployment emphasized by interviewees. Accordingly, the interviewees mentioned that the process of socialization may decrease the disruptive relationship and conflict between diverse employees. They also mentioned the importance of maintaining personal identity and characteristics in the process of socialization.

The next step in applying diversity-sensitive criteria in the recruitment process is to design and place recruitment advertisements using a variety of media such as newspapers, employment agencies, sites and social media. These codes were previously mentioned in some studies, specifically, conceptual models and literature review articles. For example, [Wambui et al. \(2013\)](#) considered advertising in local newspapers as one of the ways to manage diversity in recruitment. [Kundu et al. \(2014\)](#) mentioned online recruitment programs. [Meena and Vanka \(2013\)](#) pointed to the choice of media with more access to the audience.

The use of diversity-sensitive criteria in the selection process and its relevant codes have been highlighted in previous research as well. For example, [Babalola and Marques \(2013\)](#) emphasized the presence of diverse managers in the recruitment and selection committee as one of the effective criteria. [Meena and Vanka \(2017\)](#) emphasized selecting candidates based on similar non-job related characteristics and consistent application of similar standards which are like our findings. However, there are some codes that were not considered in previous research, including “recruitment based on competencies”; “applying similar general criteria for recruitment”; and “defining operational criteria for recruitment”. [Meena and Vanka \(2017\)](#) emphasized the consideration of similar standards of selection. We divided these standards into two groups of similar general and operational (nonjudgmental) criteria in the selection process. Considering similar general criteria is related to the key criteria associated with the job and organizational preference which should be similar for all groups of applicants. Moreover, it is important to consider operational criteria which reduce the judgment of the interviewers and selection committee members in the recruitment process. Interviewees also emphasized recruitment based on competencies, as highlighted by [Namaze and Frame \(2007\)](#) that Iranian organizations are influenced by local culture.

In the context of Iran, competency management is considered an important subject. According to Civil Service Management Law, the appointment and job promotion of employees must be done by observing the necessary educational and experience conditions and of course after achieving competence and successful performance in their previous jobs. Since the late 1960s, the word meritocracy was used in Iran, but it was never developed with a comprehensive view until the management and planning organization issued a meritocracy bill. Moreover, it is important to look at the proposed codes as a package for selecting and recruiting diverse applicants. For example, it has been suggested that the concept of “competence” involves judgment and ethnicity (and gender) influences assumptions about skill. The literature suggests that, stereotypically, males are more likely to be perceived as being more competent than other individuals ([Acker, 2006](#)).

Thus, considering other DM practices including providing vacancies for under-represented groups, attention to diversity characteristics in employment, presence of minorities on the recruitment and selection committee, and applying similar criteria for recruitment can ensure that the competency-based and diversity-sensitive recruitment is operationalized.

In the present study, interviewees considered equal training opportunities including diversity and equality in training courses and DM training. This finding is also motioned in other studies. For example, [Zaman et al. \(2021\)](#) consider intellectual training and development as a DM practice that can be used as a coping mechanism for xenophobia. [Kundu et al. \(2019\)](#) refer to training as a key factor for managing diversity. According to [Maxwell et al. \(2001\)](#), DM should create equal opportunities for the development and training of all competitors.

The present study suggests that training courses for workers are mostly limited to technical training. It seems that at least some Iranian companies view training as an expense. In the present study, DM training refers to cross-cultural training, conflict management, training programs to reduce stereotypical views and perceptual errors, and so on. Some studies refer to cross-cultural training and conflict management as relevant to DM practices (e.g. [Alcazar et al., 2013](#); [Zaman et al., 2021](#)). [Allen et al. \(2008\)](#) identify stereotypical views and perceptual errors as a barrier to DM. So, increasing managers' and employees' knowledge about perceptual errors including stereotypical views and prejudice can decrease discrimination in organizations.

The research results also show that a key DM practice in HRM subsystems is diversity-sensitive reward management including performance-based compensation, fair compensation and equality in remuneration, promotions and incentives policies. [Meena and Vanka \(2013\)](#) consider compensation as a key DM practice and argue that a good reward system ensures that there is a direct relationship between effort and reward. An effectual and fair compensation system, that reduces bias and increases employees' job satisfaction, requires to ensure a direct relationship between employees' efforts and the reward they receive ([Ahanchian and Ganji, 2017](#); [Bana, 2019](#); [Ganji and Ahanchian, 2016](#); [Ghasempour Ganji et al., 2017](#)). [Jabbour et al. \(2011\)](#) refer to fair and clear payroll policy as a key DM practice. Some of the codes of diversity-sensitive reward management category include flexible compensation (e.g. [Meena and Vanka, 2017](#); [Zaman et al., 2021](#); [Alcázar et al., 2013](#)), equal promotion opportunities for all employees and inclusion of compensation portfolio (e.g. [Maxwell et al., 2001](#)), performance-based payment (e.g. [Bana, 2019](#)) and providing various compensation portfolio for everyone (e.g. [Meena and Vanka, 2017](#)) were previously discussed in the literature. However, some of the codes retrieved from the interviews are new. For example, providing various compensation portfolios for employees in an organization is a new code.

The research results also show that diversity-sensitive performance management includes concepts such as equity in performance evaluation and offering feedback and performance evaluation in terms of diversity. [Shen et al. \(2009\)](#) refer to performance management as a key practice of DM. [Alcazar et al. \(2013\)](#) and [Nowack \(1993\)](#) refer to collaborative performance assessment as a high-performance DM practice. [Meena and Vanka \(2017\)](#) also considered regular performance feedback, evaluation and rewarding performance done at both an individual and group level, consistent application of similar standards, not using diversity characteristics as signals for job performance, valid and reliable performance measures and clear performance criteria as the DM practices, which have some similarity with this study. [Kundu et al. \(2015\)](#) refer to performance appraisal based on competency as an important DM practice. [Hellmér and Lind \(2014\)](#) refer to evaluating the status of diversity at all levels of the organization as a DM practice which is highlighted by the category of "performance evaluation in terms of diversity" in the current study. However, we add some new practices to the existing literature. For example, and 360-degree performance evaluation are mentioned by the interviewees as a DM practices. This practice is also rooted in the cultural context of Iran, which is mostly based on family and friendly relationships, considering preference for in-group members ([Namazie and Frame, 2007](#); [Soltani et al., 2012](#)), and require some procedures including performance appraisal based on competency and 360-degree performance to ensure that the performance evaluation system is fair.

Theoretical and practical implications

The current study contributes to the DM literature in several ways. This study is conducted in a developing, nonwestern country with specific cultural and religious characteristics which makes it different from previous studies (e.g. [Ismail and Ford, 2010](#); [Fang et al., 2010](#)). In Iran, legal regulations and organizational policies of equality are rudimentary. Moreover, the dearth of qualitative research in the field of DM is a serious gap ([Yadav and Lenka, 2020](#)), thus the current research is amongst the limited studies in terms of its context and methodology. Moreover, although the concern for workforce diversity and equality in organizations is an HRM concern, such studies generally focus on organizational behavior aspects ([D'Netto et al., 2014](#)) and the need for diversity research in the field of HRM is quite essential. Accordingly, we propose DM practices in HRM subsystems in a developing country context, to enrich the current literature.

We found a combination of the usual and innovative DM practices in Iran including competency-based selection, evaluation and promotion systems, providing various compensation portfolios for everyone in the organization, considering staff socialization in the form of experimental deployments, the establishment of similar general and operational (nonjudgmental) criteria in the selection process, conducting training programs to reduce stereotypical views and perceptual errors, considering three level of personal, organizational and team-based performance compensation, and using 360-degree performance evaluation. While these dimensions are related to the context of the Iranian organizations, these may also be used in other contexts with similar characteristics.

This study has highlighted key DM practices within the HRM subsystems in the private sector organizations in Iran. The diversity-sensitive HRM practices pertain to recruitment and selection, training, performance management and reward management. As the concept of DM is new in Iranian organizations, this study indicates how organizations in the initial stages of DM can consider such practices in their HRM subsystems. The general approach seems to focus on providing equal opportunity and nondiscriminatory policies instead of considering affirmative or positive action.

The study has highlighted the need for organizations to consider diversity in all aspects of HRM subsystems including recruitment and selection, training, performance management and reward management. Paying attention to each subsystem can enable employment of diverse workers and their effective management. Moreover, managers and authorities may consider DM practices in each subsystem as a package to ensure a diverse, fair and equal HRM system.

Recruitment as the “main gate” for diverse employees’ entry into firms is a key element in diversity management. To attract a diverse pool of applicants, job opportunities may be advertised in diverse medias with high accessibilities. Organizational authorities and managers also can consider that socialization in the form of experimental deployment may decrease the disruptive relationship and conflict between diverse employees. At the same time, it is important to maintain, respect and embrace the unique identity and characteristics of diverse workforce in this process. To make a competency-based selection system more appropriate, it is important to integrate it with other selection criteria including representation of diverse members on selection committees, providing vacancies for under-represented groups, attention to diversity characteristics in employment, and considering equal general and operational selection criteria. With regards to consideration of an inclusive training system, it is important to consider inclusive and diverse training courses, as well as providing diversity related courses to reduce stereotypical views and perceptual errors, and so on. Moreover, firms may consider offering diversity training to both diverse and majority employees, to improve the overall climate of inclusion and acceptance. Diversity management can be encouraged through performance appraisal if it is viewed as a managerial goal. Social inclusion and cultural sensitivity trainings may be prioritized to promote diversity. As the issues of social inclusion/

exclusion are rooted in the Iranian society as a whole, extensive government policies and law enforcement may be considered to value diverse individuals and communities.

Limitations and future research directions

The current study has a few limitations. Due to the use of qualitative research, the generalization of the result should be considered with caution. Thus, it is recommended to conduct quantitative studies to provide a scale, as well as test the implications of these DM practices on different outcomes including HR effectiveness, job satisfaction and organizational performance. The absence of institutions to assess Iranian organizations based on DM performance led the researchers to consider the long way to find organizations that were expected to have a higher level of diversity. However, there may be other ways to find these organizations. It is also possible that there are organizations with higher diversity and more relevant approaches to DM in Iran, which were not studied in this research. In the current study, we considered four dimensions of diversity (gender, age, ethnicity, religion) in Iranian organizations as a whole. However, we did not focus on how each of these dimensions is separately managed in Iranian organizations. Accordingly, it may be valuable for future researchers to explore how each dimension of diversity is managed in the organizational context, and what are the issues and challenges pertaining to that specific dimension. We conducted this research to provide a model of DM practices in the HRM system, and not investigate the affecting factors including drivers, outcomes and moderators which can be addressed by other researchers. Our study shows that Iranian organizations face some legal and cultural obstacles in effective DM. Thus, conducting phenomenological research to explain the obstacles to DM in organizations in developing countries may be a fruitful avenue for future research. As DM is a relatively new concept in Iran, it may be valuable for future researchers to identify situations where diverse employees such as women and ethnic or religious minorities perceive inequalities and the extent such inequalities are attributed to HRM subsystems such as recruitment, career or reward management. From a managerial perspective, it may be valuable to identify issues facing managers in implementing inclusive HR practices.

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