

# Chapter 15

## Islamic Perspectives on Work-Based Learning

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### Introduction

Islam is the third and last of the monotheistic religions (after Judaism and Christianity) in the world. The holy book of Islam is the Qur'an, which contains the words of Allah (God) sent to the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him—PBUH), considered the last prophet in a line of prophets from Moses to Jesus. People practicing this religion are called Muslims and follow the orders of Allah and the teachings and examples of the Prophet Mohammed (PBHU). The core of the Muslim faith is the notion that there is no God but Allah and Mohammad (PBUH) is his messenger. One of the best ways to describe Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is to look at his life and actions in their entirety:

The Prophet (PBUH) is similarly unparalleled in the way in which he was the foremost in practicing all the forms of worship found in his religion, and the first in piety and the fear of God; in his observing the duties of worship fully and with attention to their profoundest dimensions, even while engaged in constant struggle and activity; in his practice of worship combining in perfect fashion the beginning and end of worship and servitude to God without imitation of anyone. (Nursi 1998, p. 202)

Thus, he (PBUH) is considered as the most excellent example of all Muslims of his time as well as of all other Muslims that are to come after him.

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Muslims believe that they are sent to this world to serve God. “Because Islam means surrender or submission to the will of God, Muslims have tended to place primary emphasis on obeying or following God’s will as set forth in Islamic law” (Esposito 1988, p. 68). Furthermore, Muslims consider Islam as the universal religion sent to all people on earth; this is evident by fast-growing numbers of Muslim converts around the world. Although there are similarities between Islam and Judaism and Christianity, Muslims view the latter faiths as partially changed, altered, or corrupted by people over time. Furthermore, Muslims believe that Islam is the continuation and the final version of God’s revelations to people, in which previous revelations were sent through different messengers of God, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (peace be upon them).

The Muslim faith can be approached within the framework of five pillars of Islam and the Islamic law (Shari’a). The five pillars of Islam include Shahada—creed to the oneness of Allah and believing in his last messenger Mohammed, performing daily Salat (five daily prayers), fasting during the month of Ramadan (entire month), giving Zakat (almsgiving), and pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime if one can afford it and is in good health. Shari’a, on the other hand, is “the path not only leading to Allah, the Most High, but the path believed by all Muslims to be the path shown by Allah, the Creator himself through His Messenger, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)” (Doi 1997, p. 2). Muslims believe that Shari’a is a comprehensive way of life, dictated through God’s words in the Qur’an and through God’s messenger Muhammad (PBUH). Thus, Shari’a is the Islamic law regulating all parts of Muslim life from education to welfare, banking, and all other aspects of life. Muslims have two denominations: Sunni (majority of Muslims in the world are Sunni Muslims) and Shia (a smaller denomination of this faith). According to Muslim jurists, the goal of Shari’a is to promote happiness by mandating best efforts in the protection and preservation of five basic values: (i) life, (ii) intellect, (iii) religion, (iv) property, and (v) dignity. Furthermore, Shari’a is not just a penal code which is one aspect of the Shari’a with unimaginably high burden of proof standards. However, Shari’a encompasses a Muslim’s life from brushing teeth and showering to dispute resolution and rules of individual and societal conduct. In the current social and political backdrop of the Western world where “Shari’a” is a buzz word inciting fear, animosity, and misunderstanding, comprehending the role of Shari’a in a Muslim’s life and its impact on a Muslim’s desire to engage in work-based learning is essential for the global and dynamic world of business.

Although Islam was born in Mecca in 610, the largest Muslim country today is Indonesia, which is the home of over 200 million Muslims (Indonesia 2011). Islam is the second largest religion as well as the fast-growing faith in the world (Zein 2007). Consequently, Muslims live all over the world, particularly in the West (both in Europe and the Northern America). Considering the rising climate of Islamophobia—the prejudice, hatred, or irrational fear of Islam or Muslims—as well as the continued inaccurate portrayal of Islam by the Western media through associating this religion of peace with terrorism or extremism, it has become even more crucial and important to understand the foundations and core of Islam. Many

Muslims live in the West and participate in all aspects of life including work, education, and politics.

Al-Faruqi (1986) argued over three decades ago that “mutual dependence for economic and political survival has led to a renewed search for commonalities among nations” (p. 78). Considering the societal, commercial, financial, and technological advances of our century, such interdependence has grown even deeper and stronger. There are a large number of developing countries in the world (except for a few that are part of the G-20 such as Turkey, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia) in which the majority of their populations are Muslim. This fact does certainly point out the growing need for education in the Muslim world. But for a religion that begins with the command of “Read,” why is it the case that Muslim populations around the world are falling behind the rest of the world (for the most part) and remain illiterate, uneducated or minimally educated, and underdeveloped? How does illiteracy affect the workplace, production, innovation, research and development of human resources, and work-based learning in the Muslim countries? What are the forces that contributed to this current state in the Muslim world? How does Islam view learning in general and work-based learning in particular? This chapter critically addresses these questions to by providing a review of literature on *learning* from the Islamic viewpoint and then discussing the implications of this Islamic viewpoint on work-based learning in today’s contemporary organizations. Furthermore, implications of this perspective to performance paradigm within the organization will also be discussed in the context of a globally competitive and technologically advanced world of business.

## Learning in Islam

It is a generally accepted fact among the people who follow and study Islam that acquiring knowledge and engaging in continuous learning are in the core of Islam. Learning is often considered within the context of seeking knowledge and acting upon that knowledge. From a Western philosophy, knowledge can be described as “achievement requiring a mind slow rather than quick to believe—which waits for, expects, and weighs evidence before agreeing” (Paul 1993, p. 380). Contrary to what the Western philosophers and scientists generally believe, “knowledge received through hearing and seeing depends on the human ‘heart’” (Shafi 2004, p. 542). Thus, there is a fundamental difference between the Western and the Islamic notion of learning. Both the Qur’an and Prophet Muhammad emphasize and highlight the importance of seeking knowledge and acting upon what one learns. Verses from the Qur’an and hadiths of the prophet (PBUH) demonstrate that this, in fact, is a lifelong mandate for all Muslims. Lifelong learning is not only crucial in helping individuals to help themselves through getting educated but, more importantly, to help them to better understand God’s message and commands through enhancing one’s understanding of the world by engaging in continuing education. One of the most significant

evidence for this mandate is that the first revelations of God to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were about reading and learning:

Read: in the name of thy Lord who created man from a clot. Read: and thy Lord is the most bounteous, who taught by the pen, taught man that which he knew not. (Holy Qur'an, 96: 1-5)

However, this is not necessarily the only verse from the Holy Qur'an that commands Muslims to learn to gain knowledge and enhance their lives (from worshipping God to conducting everyday business) based on that knowledge. Consequently, in another verse, Allah reminds Muslims:

And Allah has brought you out from the wombs of your mothers while you know nothing. And He gave you hearing, sight, and hearts that you might give thanks (to Allah). (Holy Qur'an, 16: 78)

Muslims believe that without proper knowledge humanity is at lost. Hathout (1995) points out the four cardinal features that are unique to human species. These are knowledge, an awareness of good and evil, freedom of choice, and accountability. Seeking knowledge is an innate human characteristic. It is this aspect of humans upon which Islam focuses and through which the remaining three features can be best utilized and actualized. Knowledge is also seen as a precondition to understanding and comprehending Allah. But not all knowledge should also be sought. Islam distinguishes knowledge as both beneficial and harmful in content. Therefore, Muslims are obligated to discern between the beneficial knowledge and harmful knowledge. A Muslim learner is then to refrain from any knowledge that would lead them to transgress God's commands. On the other hand, this charges the Muslim scholar or scientist with the duty to study all aspects of knowledge (from Islamic sciences to hard sciences and social sciences). It is through the Islamic lenses that these Muslim scholars and scientists continue to study sciences to be able to identify beneficial knowledge that will bring the Muslim believers closer to God. Ghazzali, one of the prominent scholars of Islam, argued that "effort to acquire knowledge is the worship of mind" (Karim 1996, p. 55). In fact, Muslims are encouraged to pray Allah to increase them in knowledge: And say: 'My Lord! Increase me in knowledge (Holy Qur'an, 20: 114).

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also emphasized the importance of gaining knowledge, engaging in learning, and gaining education to all Muslims throughout their lives through his hadiths (sayings) and his Sunnah (actions). The prophet (PBUH) said, "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim" (Ibn Majah: 1/224). Thus, lifelong education is an obligation for every Muslim as they need to seek knowledge for as long as they live. He (PBUH) further emphasized the fact that those who seek knowledge in order to improve and enhance themselves and the societies they live will be rewarded by God: "Whoever follows a path in the pursuit of knowledge, Allah (SWT) will make a path to Paradise easy for him" (al-Bukhaari, Kitaab al-'Ilm, 10). One may acquire knowledge through memorizing, studying, reading, making notes, comprehending, contemplating, and other actions that basically facilitate and foster learning (Al-Hanbali 2001). Additionally,

Islam views an individual who has knowledge superior to a person who merely worships. Hazrat Anas (may Allah be pleased with him) relates that the holy prophet (PBUH) said, “A person who goes (out of his house) in search of knowledge, he is on Allah’s way and he remains so till he returns” (Riyadh-U-Saleheen, Book of Knowledge: 1385). The role of learning in Islam is further emphasized in the following narrated hadith of the Prophet Mohammed as described by Ghazzali:

The Holy Prophet was once asked: O Prophet of God, which action is best? He said: Knowledge. He was then questioned: Which knowledge do you mean? He said: With your knowledge of God a few actions will suffice and your ignorance about God will not suffice even though actions are numerous. He said: On the Day of Resurrection, God will raise up the worshippers and the learned men. He will say: O the congregation of the learned men I have not imbued you with my knowledge about you, I have not placed knowledge in you in order to punish you. Go, I have forgiven you. (Karim 1996, p. 17)

Furthermore, the prophet (PBUH) said, There is no envy except for two persons: one whom God has given knowledge according to which he conducts himself and teaches it to the people and one whom God has given wealth and power to spend it and he spends it in good deeds (al-Bukhaari, *Kitaab al-‘Ilm*, 490). As evident both from the Qur’an and the hadiths (sayings) of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Islam places great emphasis on learning as the core component of education. Islam identifies three basic sciences to be learned and acted upon regardless of the individual’s situation, circumstance, or background. These are the science of faith (iman)—how to safeguard one’s beliefs of Islam; the science of purification, prayer (salat)—how to purify the heart; and the science of fasting (Swam)—how to purify the body. These sciences serve as the foundation and framework of learning for Muslims. Muslim scholars also emphasize this in their work. Upon gaining knowledge in these three basic areas of science, Muslims can seek knowledge in other areas of sciences as these three fields of study would serve as the foundation for learning of all types of knowledge beneficial in advancing and transforming humanity. To help guide Muslim learners, Muslim scholars identified steps for studying these sciences. For example, *Ibn al-Qayyim Al-Jawziyyah* suggests that there are six stages for acquiring knowledge. These are “(1) asking questions in a good manner; (2) remaining quiet and listening attentively; (3) understanding well; (4) memorizing; (5) teaching; and (6) acting upon the knowledge and keeping to its limits” (p. 283). When asking question, the person should be free of any attitudes and should ask the question for the sake of inquiry and learning not any other inappropriate intention. It is certainly permission to engage in debate or discussion as long as it is conducted with respect to each other’s opinion. In the case of remaining quiet and listening attentively, the idea here is to avoid any distraction which may be due to speaking or creating any kind of noise. It reminds learners that they are not alone and the learning needs of other people should also be respected. The third step of “understanding well” ensures that learners gain a substantial grasp of the content because without understanding learning cannot occur. The fourth step, “memorizing,” has its roots from Islamic education because Muslims are encouraged to memorize the Qur’an as much as they can. “The most influential

factors in strengthening memory are industriousness and commitment” (Al-Zarnuji 2001, p. 41). Furthermore, in recent years, more and more educators in the West are referring the role of memorization and utility of it in helping learners acquire knowledge (Ding 2007; Bavis et al. 2000; Cook and Smith 2006). The fifth step is teaching what one learns. This is not to mean that one should preach what they learn but to help others learn; one should teach what they know to help others acquire knowledge and to help knowledge reach others. Finally, the sixth step requires the Muslim learners to act upon the knowledge acquired and keep that knowledge to its limits. Since there is no point in simply acquiring knowledge and not using it in a beneficial way, Islam urges Muslims to act upon any beneficial knowledge that they acquire, “for God, glorified and exalted is He, to whom all praise belongs, created for each science people who learn and practice it, for each path people travel it, and for each station and state people who dwell in them, so that each has what suits him and nothing else” (Al-Badawi 2001, p. 36). Finally, Muslims view knowledge as a necessary prerequisite for achieving justice and peace in the world.

## Work-Based Learning

We live in an age of technology, which makes it possible for us to seek knowledge and access information without leaving the comfort of our homes or even our office or workplace. Technology is becoming more integrated in our lives and providing us with many nontraditional ways of acquiring knowledge, engaging in learning through easy access and immediate availability of information. “The rapid and extensive diffusion of information-based technologies to manufacturing and service sectors, urban and rural places, and traditional and high-tech industries is transforming the marketplace and workplace” (Rosenfeld 2000, p. 3). Such a dramatic change in our organizations unavoidably affected our jobs, professions, and ultimately our careers. Learning one’s job and becoming proficient in one’s profession imply a whole new set of assumptions when compared to less than half a century ago. The knowledge gained through vocational training or academic education can become old, irrelevant, or even absolute in a matter of years. “The current pace of change means that everyone must continue to develop in order simply to stay in the same place and even more so to ‘keep ahead of the game’” (Clifford and Thorpe 2007, p. 2). This mandates the individual employee as well as his/her organization to rethink and reconsider the ways they approach to work-based learning. Work-based learning, thus, becomes a catalyst for organizational development, improvement, enhancement, and advancement.

In this chapter, work-based learning is viewed within the training framework. Davis and Davis (1998) explain as follows:

Training is the process through which skills are developed, information is provided, and attributes are nurtured, in order to help individuals who work in organizations to become more effective and efficient in their work. Training helps the organization to fulfill its purposes and goals, while contributing to the overall development of workers. Training is necessary to help workers qualify for a job, do a job, or advance, but it is also essential for

enhancing and transforming the job, so that the job actually adds value to the enterprise. Training facilitates learning, but learning is not only a form of activity designed and encouraged by specially prepared trainers to generate specific performance improvements. Learning is also a more universal activity, designed to increase capability and capacity and is facilitated formally and informally by many types of people at different levels of the organization. Training should always hold forth the promise of maximizing learning. (p. 44)

In this context, training is viewed as a learning process to help individual engage in various activities to help them develop, increase, and enhance new skills and expertise through continuous learning as related to their jobs within the organization. Thus, training is the tool enabling an individual increase their human capital—"the productive capabilities of human beings that are acquired at some cost and that command a price in the labor market because they are useful in producing goods and services" (Parnes 1986, p. 1). Although such an alien notion of human capital may be conceived as highly pragmatic and utilitarian within the Islamic context of work-based learning, we argue that neither philosophically nor spiritually does this conflict or clash with the teachings of Islam. Islam teaches and emphasizes "work" as one of the fundamental principles of life and not working is condoned for anyone. "Just as the Islamic sciences have originated from Divine Unity and aim to return man to it, the natural sciences have tried to discover the interrelation of all created being and the unity which underlies the world of multiplicity" (Nasr 1981, p. 124). This attitude towards work is inherent in the pillars of Islam when one is always reminded about the daily prayers and not being lazy in performing them.

The concept of work-based learning was first introduced to the Arabian Peninsula with the arrival of Islam through the notion of adult education, which "was imparted to the masses, not so much in order to teach them the art of reading and writing as with the purpose of giving instruction in the Qur'an and in the Faith" (Rahman 1979, p. 182). This basic level of adult education then took the form of apprenticeship in the Muslim workplace. "Apprenticeship has been a basic and persistence influence on the development of workplace and is probably the most non-school institution around which training has grown" (Swanson and Holton 2009, p. 37). In the case of Muslim apprenticeship, the child (mostly boys) from an early age would be given up to his master (the business owner) who would not only teach him the profession but also all the etiquette and mannerisms expected by the society from the people practicing this particular profession. The child would often stay at a place given by the master and would spend minimum amount of time on socialization and unproductive activities. This was regarded crucial in getting the apprentice (Mubtada) to develop a knowledge base, skill set, and the experience needed to perform his profession. Although the apprenticeship system has evolved into an internship system today, it is still an important aspect of human resource development.

Islam also emphasizes communal learning because all knowledge we acquire and all our actions which are the results of such knowledge should benefit the society either directly or indirectly. In this regard, Muslims "of knowledge must be sympathetic and helpful rather than jealous, for envy is injurious and devoid of benefit" (Al-Zarnuji 2001, p. 41). This also encourages some form of informal and

incidental learning where individuals are encouraged to share their knowledge. In his typology and classification of the Islamic sciences, Ramadan identifies Shari'a as the sources of Islamic sciences (1999). Shari'a is composed of the sciences of the Qur'an and the sciences of the hadith. Ramadan argues that Shari'a leads to the four different areas of knowledge including science of 'aqida (the creed—oneness of God); Usul al-fiqh (principles of jurisprudence—foundations of Islamic law); science of akhlaq (morals, ethics—studying individual behavior in every aspect of life); and Tasawwuf (Sufism—study of the inward journeying towards God). All of these areas of science lead to the study of Fiqh (jurisprudence—the study of Islamic law and jurisprudence presented in two fields of study. The first one is 'ibadat which includes rites/modes of worship—the study of rules related to ritual purification, prayer, almsgiving, and pilgrimage). The second one is Mu'amalat which is any other than formal worship—the study of rules in respect to all aspects of life such as social affairs, legislation, commerce, and learning. The Mu'amalat branch of Shari'a governs all aspects of work-based learning. Furthermore, Islam takes the period and context into account when studying knowledge. This is done through Fiqh al-waqi (events and cases) and Fiqh al-awlawiyat (priorities), which refers to “the study of the determination of priorities in the application of the Islamic laws and regulations in the light of period and context” (p. 40), and Fiqh al-da'wa (communicating Islam to others), which is the “study of the methods of explaining and transmitting the Message of Islam according to the period and context” (p. 40). Furthermore, Rahman (1979) argues that “whereas, 'ilm is both a process of learning and refers to an objective, organized and disciplined body of data, fiqh, at this stage, is not the name of a particular discipline or objective system, but only the name of a process or activity of understanding and deducing” (Rahman 1979, p. 101). Consequently, Islam purports, supports, and fosters the notion of work-based learning (as included in the study of rules in respect to all aspects of life).

Work-based learning in Islam can be approach within the context of spirituality and learning. Tisdell (2003) defines spirituality as a “personal belief and experience of a divine spirit or higher purpose, about how we construct meaning, and what we individually and communally experience and attend to and honor as the sacred in our lives” (p. 29). Consequently, in the Islamic worldview of work-based learning, “it is necessary to fully immerse oneself in the study of knowledge at all times” (Al-Zarnuji 2001, p. 39). It should further be noted that Muslims, by definition of their belief systems, are spiritual followers. Hence, such an attitude is to be carried over to the realm of work by Muslims in that Muslims take this so seriously as one of the mandates of their religion. In regard to training, for example, Muslim employees should be very motivated, energetic, and concentrated on learning to help enhance and improve their job and their individual performance. In fact, they are “mandated to work in a way as if it is their own work and that if they do not perform the work honestly and to the best of their ability, they will be held accountable in the Day of Judgment” (Rehman 1995, p. 165). This Qur'anic perspective enforces a level of constant consciousness of God and his presence in the minds of Muslim employees where they are aware that God is watching them at all times and they are not allowed to do anything harmful, unbeneficial, or



inefficient such as not engaging in learning, not transferring what they learn to their work, or wasting their time at work.

Al-Badawi (2001) notes that people should be careful in choosing what is important to learn by determining what is of importance and beneficial to learn personally, and then if qualified, they should help others to learn to benefit them as well. This approach to learning first of all brings an important step to individual's intentions to learn. That is, one needs to be able to discern what is important and not important to learn. Furthermore, it suggests a pragmatic approach to learning, which can help the individual identify the needs and target and choose the path to best and most effectively achieve it. In the context of work-based learning, this would put the responsibility on the trainer to carefully design, develop, and execute a training program in which the training goals are clearly outlined and effectively communicated to the trainees. This will allow the learners "to know the truth not by reorienting it but by reorienting himself so that he can become worthy of being its recipient" (Nasr 1981, p. 156). This distinction is important for work-based learning within the context of training and development.

When it comes to learning, Islam prohibits any barrier and obstacle for learning on the basis of gender, age, or ethnicity as a prerequisite for learning. "The Qur'an provides for the participation of women in the state, society, and all social and political activities, except for few exceptions related to their gender particularity" (Badawi 1995, p. 68). So, work-based learning should be accessible to all members of the organization. This addresses one of the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter: why Muslims, in general, fall behind the rest of the world in terms of education? We argue that this is due to the ignorance and immense influence of local cultures in which education is either deemed with low respect or women are being prevented from basic education because they are culturally viewed as secondary. This is an important conflict with Islam's approach to gender equity in education in which both men and women are equal and have the same rights when it comes to seeking knowledge and continuous learning.

## Conclusion

Work-based learning is part of the Islamic perspective mandating and encouraging all Muslims to learn. Qur'an makes it clear that humans have only been given a little knowledge urging for continuous need to explore, learn, and discover. In the Holy Qur'an, God says "...Nor have human being been given of knowledge more than very little" (17:85). This is also evident in the historical development of humanity: as we seek knowledge, we learn more, which presents us with the sea of infinite knowledge to dive in. Furthermore, "... the Qur'an also assumes that a shared discourse of meaning and mutual care is not only possible but also necessary for the development of moral individualities and communities" (Barlas 2002, p. 21). Knowledge and learning in the workplace should result in morally apt and ethically conscious employees and organizations.

Employees who view work-based learning as “a virtue and a prelude to every praiseworthy action” (Al-Zarnuji 2001, p. 64) will further help organizations to engage in organizational learning “when members of the organization act as learning agents of the organization, responding to changes in the internal and external environments of the organization by detecting and correcting errors in organizational theory-in-use, and embedding the results of their enquiry in private images and shared maps of organization” (Argyris and Schon 1978, p. 16) and ultimately become a learning organization in which “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to act together” (Senge 1990, p. 3). Merriam et al. (2007) argue that organizations supporting organizational learning and fostering a learning organization environment have the ability to improve “their capacity to respond quickly and in novel ways, thus increasing its ability to foster innovation and change” (p. 45). Islamic perspectives on work-based learning will certainly support and contribute to such organizational efforts, particularly when “work serves as a way of worshipping God as long as it is lawful and involves halal (permissible) acts” (Akdere et al. 2006, p. 358). Thus, any work-based learning activity will be regarded as an act of worship by the Muslim believer.

In this chapter, we have attempted to explore the Islamic perspectives on work-based learning. Understanding how Muslims view work-based learning and taking these perspectives into account while designing any work-based learning activities will help the organizations with Muslim employees better develop and utilize their Muslim workforce. Furthermore, for organizations in the Muslim world, revisiting and reconsidering these perspectives will undoubtedly lead to the revival of Muslims and the organizations they are working in their approach and attitude towards learning in general and work-based learning in particular. Having Muslim employees with such work ethics will certainly result in increased employee performance and enhance organizational outcomes which will help organizations achieve work environments “where employees are focused, passionate, and want to be there and who are innovative, productive, and do the right things the right ways” (Macey et al. 2009, p. 1). The ultimate outcome of this would be more education and enlightenment in the Muslim world.

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