Management Skills of Iranians: a Comparison of Technical, Human and Conceptual Differences based on Gender, Age and Longevity in Management Ranks

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Abstract:
In Iran, management and leadership trends can be traced back through thousands of years of experience. This study focused on the management skills of respondents from Iran to see if gender, age and longevity in management can be significant factors in their technical, human and conceptual competencies. The results of 421 respondents show that there are significant differences linked to gender, age, and management experience. Age and management experience are positively related to better technical, human and conceptual scores. Implications for educators, managers, and human resource professionals are presented.

Key words: Age, experience, gender, Iran, Iranians, and management skills.

Introduction to Management

For thousands of years, it has been assumed that aging and experience can make people mature and wise. This is assumed in promotions in military organizations as well as in the government area and private organizations. The modern workplace is diverse, filled with men and women professionals from different generations and years of management experience. Workers bring different values and expectations; as such managers and organizational leaders must create an inclusive workplace and this necessity comes from the pluralization of society (Cooper, 1998: 51). Today’s organizational leaders and managers must have good technical, human, and conceptual skills in order to build strong teams in these competitive times. Consequently, this study focuses on understanding the management skills (technical, human, and conceptual) of Iranian respondents based on gender, age and years of experience in the management ranks.

Older managers with more years of experience are likely to make good long-term strategic decisions. This is why organizations usually seek to hire experienced managers because the choices made by “management are influential on organizational outcomes” (Voges, Tworoger and Bendixen, 2009: 33). Of course, effective strategies require management teams that are diverse in terms of age, gender and overall experience. It has been documented that the “primary mover of the organization is its strategy, which details its purpose and direction...organizational strategy influences the effectiveness of
diversity in the organization” (Knouse, 2009: 348). Some authors claim that using the
talents and skills of diverse individuals from different departments or organizations
“often leads to opportunities for cost reduction that might not otherwise be considered”
(Pudlowski, 2009: 39).

Tzabbar writes that “firms interested in exploring new knowledge boundaries and
changing their capabilities should hire personnel whose knowledge is different from that
already residing in the firms” (2009: 891). Diverse workers and managers are needed to
successfully capitalize on different opinions, experiences, and talents that might exist in
the organization as well as in the community. Having a diverse management team “is
especially important when there are significant complementarities and spillovers between
the actions of different individuals or groups” (Postrel, 2009: 273). Recent years have
witnessed economic changes such as globalization and growth of the global market and
multinational companies. Iranian society is also experiencing changes in the workplace
similar to those experienced in Western societies. For example, competing in a global
market and implementation of new methods for increasing the efficiency of workplace
(Karimi and Nouri, 2009). Alavi, Yasin and Zimmerer (2004) investigated a sample of
Iranian business executives and concluded that there are indications of a transition from a
traditional and religiously based orientation toward more open, flexible and market-based
policies in Iran.

Iran is a unique and complex country with a very rich and ancient cultural
heritage which has strategic and economic importance in Persian Gulf and West Asia.
However, Iran has not received the attention it deserves in many areas of managerial and
academic research. Much of what is known about the country is based on superficial and
biased image of media. Iran, with its large market (over 70 million), educated workforce,
and tremendous natural resources such as oil and gas, and numerous manufacturing and
petrochemical industries which require heavy investment and development, has a great
potential for multinational enterprises, corporations, and international companies which
are interested in working and/or investment in this country (Yeganeh and Su, 2007).
However, in a study by Namazie and Frame (2007), it was indicated that although there is
a great potential in the Iranian workforce, which provides an educated and young
workforce, the Iranian labor force suffers from low productivity and performance. They
commented that employees appear frustrated, unmotivated, and often do not show
commitment to their jobs. Moreover, many employees lack the necessary skills and work
ethics to work with multinational corporations (MNCs). Such perceptions also apply to
other people in the region, but research finds that they are, and they can be, effective
managers and leaders (Kaifi and Mujtaba, 2010; Mujtaba, Khanfar, and Khanfar, 2010;
Mujtaba and Kaifi, 2010; Mujtaba and Sadat, 2010). So, this study attempts to provide
more information in regard to Iranian management skills with consideration of such
variables as gender, age and longevity in management ranks.

Management Levels and Ranks

Academicians and practitioners see the term management as the achievement of
organizational goals with and through people using available resources in the most
efficient manner possible (Mujtaba, 2007). Managers’ effectiveness vary based on their
gender, age, years of experience, and other such variables. Regardless of the
demographic variables, people use the four functions of management which are planning, organizing, leading, and controlling (POLC) to achieve their organizational objectives in an efficient manner. Management is also divided into three levels: first-level supervisors (managers), middle managers and top management. The changing story in management today, is that the layers and layers of middle managers that most large organizations used to have are giving way to self-empowered teams and flatter organizations.

The three basic skills that managers use are technical, human, and conceptual and that the proportion of one’s time spent in these areas may change as managers go up the hierarchy (Katz, 1955). Furthermore, a manager’s time in each of these areas might vary due to their age, gender, and age. For example, senior managers who are often older, may not spend as much time in technical functions as those who are in first line management. Top managers tend to spend more time using their conceptual skills. Top management has been found to be an important component in enacting an organization’s vision and ultimately its performance (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985; Voges et al., 2009).

Research of this type has shown that education and experience help managers acquire relevant managerial skills that let them perform their jobs effectively, especially conceptual, human, and technical skills. Jones and George provide the following definitions for human, technical, and conceptual skills:

1. **Technical skills** are job-specific knowledge and techniques.
2. **Human skills** include the ability to understand, alter, lead, and control the behavior of people and groups.
3. **Conceptual skills** include the ability to analyze a situation and distinguish between cause and effect. Conceptual skills are often gained through formal education, reflection, and experience (Jones and George, 2009, pp. 17-18).

It should also be noted that promotion in managerial hierarchy is often linked to a manager’s ability to acquire the management skills and competencies that a particular company believes are important. While gender may not be a factor in the effectiveness of one’s management, age and experience are certainly important variables. However, the variables of age, gender and management experience might all be factors for consideration in various positions in the firm.

The new generations of Iranian workers demand leaders and managers who have high humanistic attributes to help enhance morale and productivity in the workplace. Thus, it becomes important to learn what dominant skills (technical, human, or conceptual) Iranian men and women bring to the workforce. This study researches whether Iran’s management skills are similar or different and whether there are variances based on their age, gender and years of experience as managers.

**Iranians in the Workplace**

Today, Iranian workers are made up of younger and older individuals, men and women, as well as professionals with some and many years of management experience. Iran was formerly known as Persia until 1935 and it is home to one of the world’s oldest continuous major civilizations. Culturally speaking, based on Hofstede’s findings (1980), Iran is classified in near Eastern cluster including Turkey and Greece (Ronen and Shenkar, 1985). However, in a more recent research conducted through GLOBE project,
Iran is considered to be part of the South Asian cultural cluster consisting of such countries as India, Thailand and Malaysia (Javisan and Dastmalchian, 2003). These findings may seem very different from the image of Iran as a predominant Islamic/Middle-Eastern country which is often confused with its neighbors (Yeganeh and Su, 2007). Iran has many commonalities with neighboring Muslim countries; however, due to its unique historical, linguistic and racial identities it has a different and unique culture (Ali and Amirshahi, 2002). The nationalist aspect of Iranian culture is related to Ancient Persian civilization and Zoroastrianism heritage which date from 3000-2000 BC and are still prevalent in the society. On the other hand, Islamic traditions also continue to play to their significant role in the Iranian society.

Iran has the largest population in, and is one of the largest countries of, the Middle East. As a result of the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran went from being perceived as one of the most modern and Westernized countries of the Middle East, to being regarded as a fundamentalist Islamic country (Menashri, 2001). Before the 1979 revolution, Iran underwent modernization as a direct consequence of the former Iranian monarch’s policies. The ensuing Islamic revolution overthrew a 2,500-year-old history of monarchy and replaced it with an Islamic Republic. This revolution changed the entire structure of the country as well as that of workforces. Technocrats were replaced by ideologists, and a competent and skilled workforce was replaced with a loyal workforce. Therefore, competencies and management skills were not seen as a priority; rather, significance was paid to putting loyal and ideologically sound employees into key management and strategic positions. This phenomenon still persists especially in the Iranian public sector. According to Yeganeh and Su (2008) in some state owned organizations recruitment focused on compliance and code of conduct, which are based on the Islamic/revolutionary criteria. Such restrictions have resulted in increasing inefficiency in public sector. In 1980, the Iraqi invasion of Iran led to a devastating eight-year war between the two countries. After the war, in the 1990s, Iran started an era of reconstruction, trying to move beyond a war economy and opening its doors to a market economy. From the 1990s to the present day, Iran’s political and economic environment evidenced the struggle to maintain a balance between religious ideology and economic prosperity (Namazie and Frame, 2007). However, the administration approach to public sector is still very political in Iran, which has led to managerial myopia and short sighted perspective in planning among managers. This phenomenon influences the selection procedure of managers and also causes a high turnover among them (Danaee Fard, Moshabbaki, Abbasi and Hassanpoor, 2010).

The Iran’s economy faces many challenges and one of the biggest is the size and ownership of the public sector, which controls roughly 80 per cent of the country’s economic activity. The growth of the public sector began after the Islamic revolution, when many large industries were nationalized: private sector companies were confiscated and taken into government control (Khajehpour, 2001). Nevertheless, at present, there is an emphasis on the transition to a market economy in Iran, including the encouragement of private sector development, privatization of state enterprises and cost recovery from beneficiaries, in order to increase rationalization and efficiency of the Iranian economy (Hamdhaidari, Agahi and Papzan, 2008). Although this transformation is also highly controversial and there is widespread debate over the creation of a strong sub-governmental sector and interference of military forces in the Iran’s economy.
Another growing challenge is the demography of Iran. Approximately 70 percent of Iran’s population is under the age of 30, thus putting great pressure on the country to provide education and employment opportunities in order to maintain social stability. This also leads to a high rate of unemployment, which currently stands nearly at 11 percent (based on the Iran Labor Force Indicators, 2009), although unofficially the figure is estimated at roughly 20 percent. Moreover, the brain drain is another factor which restricts economic development of the country (Khajehpour, 2000).

In-group orientation is one of the distinguishing features of the Iranian culture, which suggests loyalty and cohesiveness towards small groups such as family and close friends (Javidan and Dastmalchian, 2003). For example, this influence of local culture on personnel practices, with its focus on pre-existing relationships and nepotism that take precedence over skills and competencies, can be seen especially in recruitment and selection, performance management and compensation. This is a more common and accepted practice in Iranian private sector companies and is especially seen in family-owned businesses and more traditional management structured companies. In the public sector, there are policies and formal channels. In practice, however, with the right contact person, more flexibility is shown (Namazie and Frame, 2007).

Iranians’ respect for authority is evident in most business dealings. The relationship between subordinates and their superiors for example is distinct and highly official. Yeganeh and Su (2007) found high degree of hierarchical distance among Iranian managers. The antecedents of this high hierarchical distance are deeply rooted in many aspects of Iranian mythology, history, politics, religion and family structure. It causes a top-down management and authoritarian decision-making in the Iranian organizations (Javidan and Dastmalchian, 2003).

Today, Iranian women are in the forefront of many changes in their country. Although the status of women at home depends on their social class, the majority of Iranian women are responsible for housekeeping, childcare, and all other aspects of running a home. Thus, employed women must bear much pressure from home and work responsibilities. Despite the existing role pressures that women confront in Iran, the number of women participating in the workplace is increasing steadily (O’Shea, 2003).

Nowadays, Iranian women participate in most fields of work and education (Karimi, 2008). In addition, many women are determined to realize their talents and capabilities in line with new ideas of gender equality and women’s rights (Ahmad-Nia, 2002). Nevertheless, there are still debates in Iran about the probable conflicts between women’s traditional and modern roles and their consequences. Women’s lives in Iran are still highly influenced by the behavior and attitudes of the men around them, like their fathers or husbands (Mehri, 1999). Furthermore, there are additional difficulties and barriers in the labor market at the wider societal level, such as employers’ preferences for male employees and formal or informal job-segregation policies, which practically limit women’s employment participation (Ahmad-Nia, 2002). It is anticipated that only 20–25% of Iranian college-educated women join the labor force (Shavarini, 2005) and their participation at the managerial level is just 13% (Jamali and Nejati, 2009).

On the other hand, various surprising transformations are occurring in the Iranian society. Nowadays, the structure of ‘the family’ has changed radically in Iran. The men are not the only breadwinners anymore and women share the procurement of livelihood. This means that women actively pursue further education to lead to better career
prospects. Furthermore, similarly to many developed nations, Iranian women make up more than 60 percent of university entrants. All these changes have led women to participate more in the public domain and progress into the managerial ranks. Nowadays, it is easy to find city and town councilwomen, even in the country’s rural areas. Several members of parliament are women and recently, a 50 year old gynecologist became Iran’s first woman cabinet member since the Islamic revolution, as the health minister (Tajaddini and Mujtaba, 2010).

In short, Iranians believe themselves to be the inheritor of a great culture and civilization: Persia. However, in recent years Iran’s working and business environment has not being that attractive. According to Gholipour Fereidouni, Masron, Nikbin and Amiri (2010), Iran’s ranking is very low internationally in terms of ease of doing business. Moreover, in recent years Iran’s controversial nuclear program has led to the imposing of economic sanctions by both the UN Security Council and some developed countries. These sanctions have had negative effects on the Iran’s economic conditions. They increase the cost of doing business and also the risk of entrepreneurial activities in Iran (Gholipour Fereidouni et al., 2010). Furthermore, these pressures limit the accessibility of Iranian workforces to latest developments and technologies which may lead to lower efficiency of workforces. All this gives Iran a unique feature and it is intriguing to see how Iranian managerial skills perform in these conditions.

**Study Methodology**

Many instruments have been used by different researchers to assess an individual’s skills for management and leadership (Katz 1955; Rahman and Yang, 2009; Garman, Burkhart and Strong, 2006; Buttner and Gryskiewicz, 1999; Egbu, 1999; Mumford, Zaccarro, Connelly and Marks, 2000).

This study used a translated version of The Style Inventory survey instrument provided by Northouse (2010: 64-65) to study adults in Iran. The English version of the survey was translated by the first author, who is a native speaker, into Persian (Farsi) and then it was given to three university professors who spoke both languages fluently for checking the accuracy of the translated survey. Then the second and third authors back-translated the Persian survey into English to see if the meaning had stayed the same. The authors and their colleagues agreed that the meaning of the survey had not changed in the Persian translated version.

It is important to recognize that research and data gathering remain challenging in Iran: This was also true for the current researchers. Most Iranian organizations are sensitive to permitting any interviews and are wary towards research. Nevertheless, a total of 650 questionnaires were personally distributed in two cities of Kerman and Tehran, and 437 surveys were returned. The surveys were distributed to public and private sector working adults in various industries. Since data collection can be difficult as some companies do not allow data collection in the company premises, this study used a convenience sampling process by collecting data from diverse firms, departments, and organizations to enhance the response rate. To guarantee confidentiality for managers and human resources professionals in each department, the data from different firms and organizations were not coded in any way and as such could not be identified or traced to any specific departments or institution. So, the convenience sample was obtained through educational institutions, businesses and entrepreneurs, private and public sector
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Institutions. A paragraph explaining the purpose of this research and guaranteeing total confidentiality was included with each survey. Data from 421 acceptable and usable questionnaires were entered in the excel file (16 unacceptable) for analysis in this study. Tehran, which is the capital and the largest city of the country, is the most important economic center and populated city of Iran. Kerman is the center of the largest province of Iran and is located in southeast of country.

The skills inventory is designed to measure three broad types of management skills: technical, human, and conceptual. One can score the questionnaire by adding the scores for each category. First, sum the responses on items 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, and 16. This is one’s technical score. Second, sum the responses on items 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, and 17. This is one’s technical skill score. Third, sum the responses on items 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18. This is one’s conceptual score. A highest score in each category would be a maximum of 30 for each skill area. A few samples of the questions included in this study are as follows:

1. Seeing the “big picture” comes easy to me.
2. One of my skills is being good at making things work.
3. My main concern is to have a supportive communication climate.

One of the main weaknesses of such a survey method is that it is self-reported data which can be biased by recent events in the respondent’s life, as well as by limited feedback from previous colleagues and bosses. Of course, those who are business owners might have a grandiose opinion of their own management styles and may rate themselves high on various questions (dimensions). These weaknesses can be best overcome by qualitative research which can be integrated into future studies.

One of the first things we wanted to know was whether respondents from Iranian culture lean more toward technical, human, and/or conceptual skills. This is important to get an overall picture of the Iranian culture and to allow international comparison. The specific research question for this study is: Do age, gender, and longevity in management experience make a significant difference in the technical, human and conceptual skills of Iranians? For this survey, the higher the overall sum of the scores, the more likely that the participant is better at that skill. The research hypotheses for this study are as follows:

- **Hypothesis 1** – Iranian respondents will have similar scores for technical, human and conceptual skills.
- **Hypothesis 2** – Iranian men and women will have similar scores for technical, human, and conceptual skills.
- **Hypothesis 3** – Younger and older Iranians will have similar scores for technical, human, and conceptual skills.
- **Hypothesis 4** – Iranians with five or less years of management experience will have similar scores for technical, human, and conceptual skills as those with six or more years of management experience.

The hypotheses were chosen to see if the Iranian national culture might be influencing respondents toward a specific dominant management skill. Furthermore,
since Iranian men and women are usually equally educated, we wanted to see if gender is a factor in managerial skills. While age is respected in Iranian culture we wanted to know how this correlated with management skills. Finally, management skill was chosen as a variable in the last hypothesis to see if more experience leads to higher conceptual skills.

In this study, 186 responses came from male and 235 were from female respondents in Iran. In regards to age, 208 responses came from those are 17 to 25 years of age. Also, 152 responses were from those are 26 years of age and older (with 80 individuals being older than 31 years of age). For longevity in management rank, 360 respondents mentioned that they had none or less than five years of management experience; however, 61 individuals did have at least six or more years of experience in management positions.

**Results**

The overall results need to be interpreted in the context of the self-reported nature of the data. What this means is that the results reflect the statements made by respondents about themselves rather than an objective assessment. This is interesting in itself because of what it reveals about respondents’ attitudes. The responses demonstrate that Iranians have fairly high scores in all three areas of management skills. In this research, Iranians studied have their highest score on technical, followed by human and conceptual skills.

The first hypothesis, “Iranian respondents will have similar scores for technical, human and conceptual skills”, as can be seen in Table I, cannot be supported as there are significant differences. Therefore, the first hypothesis is rejected.

### Table I – Iranian Management Skill Scores (St. Deviations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Technical</th>
<th>Human</th>
<th>Conceptual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iranians</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>23.84 (3.25)</td>
<td>23.36 (3.37)</td>
<td>22.66 (3.62)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Vs. Human*  
*Vs. Conceptual*  
*Vs. Technical*

*\( t = 2.10; p = 0.036 \)  
\( *t = -2.9; p = 0.004 \)  
\( *t = -4.98; p = 0.001 \)

The second hypothesis, “Iranian men and women will have similar scores for technical, human and conceptual skills,” cannot be fully supported as men reported a significantly different scores on technical and conceptual skills, but not for human skills. As presented in Table II, the human relation scores of male and female Iranians appear to be similar. However, males have significantly higher scores on the technical and conceptual skills. Therefore, the hypothesis is partially supported.

### Table II – Iranian Men and Women Management Skill Scores (St. Deviations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Technical</th>
<th>Human</th>
<th>Conceptual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>23.49 (3.23)</td>
<td>23.32 (3.37)</td>
<td>22.17 (3.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>24.28 (3.24)</td>
<td>23.41 (3.37)</td>
<td>23.28 (3.64)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| TOTAL | 421   | *\( t = -2.49; p = 0.0132 \)  
\( *t = -0.27; p = 0.8 \)  
\( *t = -3.16; p = 0.002 \)
The results reflect the statements made by respondents about themselves rather than an objective assessment. This is interesting in itself because of what it reveals about respondents attitudes.

The third hypothesis, “Younger and older Iranians will have similar scores for technical, human, and conceptual skills,” cannot be supported as older respondents (those are 31 years of age and higher) have significantly higher scores for all three skills. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

The fourth hypothesis, as can be seen from Table IV, “Iranians with five or less years of management experience will have similar scores for technical, human, and conceptual skills as those with six or more years of management experience,” cannot be supported as those with six or more years of management experience have significantly higher scores for all the skills. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected because more years of experience in management certainly appears to increase a person’s scores on the technical, human and conceptual skills.

This study has demonstrated that there are statistically significant differences in the technical, human and conceptual skills of Iranian respondents. A comparison of the gender variable has shown that Iranian men and women have similar scores for human relations but not for technical and conceptual skills. In regards to age, those who are 31 years of age and older appear to have significantly higher scores than those who are 25 years of age and younger. This means that age makes a difference in having better management skills. Finally, this study has also supported the fact that management experience does help individuals have higher scores on the technical, human and conceptual skills.

**Pragmatic Implications and Recommendations**

This study has demonstrated that Iranian participants in this research scored highest on the technical skills, followed by human skills and then conceptual skills. Iranian men in this study reported their higher scores in technical and conceptual skills.
than did women. These results are consistent with the finding of Ziefle, Ku¨nzer and Bodendieck (2004) who claimed that women usually report lower subjective technical scores.

Although according to Ghorbani and Tung (2007), Iranian women have access to most fields of study at university and can work in most occupations of their choice and they also appear to be fairly well represented, as compared to other Islamic nations, in the workplace. At managerial/professional positions, however, they are often the victims of gender discrimination in the workplace - and receive unfair and biased treatments from their supervisors, colleagues, and/or other organizational members.

As Baron (2007) argued, while personal qualities have a strong influence on the management skills, they can be acquired and taught through appropriate training and guidance (Baum, Locke and Smith, 2001). As top management has long been dominated by men who tend to hire and promote men, it is difficult for women to break through the glass ceiling even though they have achieved a high level of job performance (Peng, Ngo, Shi and Wong, 2009). Therefore, lack of resources, less family, organizational and governmental support beside less social acceptance for development of women’s careers may be some explanatory factors for the lower scores of Iranian women in technical and conceptual skills. For development of management skills, robust training, career and workforce planning are absolutely essential (Sanchez, 1994), so as Iranian women have lower privilege to enjoy such kind of programs at their workplaces, it may be explicable why they score lower than their male counterparts.

International Research has found that when female executives receive appropriate support from their organizations and not be discriminated against on the basis of their gender, they outperform their male colleagues in managerial activities, such as motivating subordinates, promoting communication, turning out high-quality work, and being good listeners (Sharpe, 2000). In the Iranian context, Safiri (2009) showed that stronger inter-organizational communication and less inequality between men and women exists in a working environment, result in a more positive evaluation of jobs by women. This research also notes that in such circumstances the productivity and performance of Iranian women increase. According to Mumford, Peterson, and Childs (1999), skills are trainable or changeable and are not necessarily stable, therefore, implementing training programs, career development plans and fair treatment toward Iranian female employees could be utilized for both employee self-development in technical and conceptual skills and also career progression within the organization.

As previously stated, skills are not necessarily enduring characteristics of the individual, but rather depend on experience and practice, and therefore may be more adaptable (Reiter-Palmon, Young, Strange, Manning and James, 2006). This may explain the other outcome of this study, namely, the finding that older Iranians and also those who have longer years of management experience report higher than their younger and less experienced counterparts, in all three areas of management skills. Greater experience of management interactions results in learning and that manager’s accumulated experience from other or similar situations is likely to have an impact on the interpretation of the anticipated problem. Therefore a person with older age and longer years of management experience may report greater ability in all three segments of management skills: technical, conceptual and human skills.
The other illumination factor may be the interest of employees to invest most in older, more skilled and experienced workers where the immediate return on their investment is perhaps higher (Bills, 2005). This may provide older employees with a superior chance to enjoy better training programs alongside more comprehensive support from their superiors to confront challenging situations. This would lead to a positive association among age, years of management experience and greater technical, conceptual and human skills performance of older and more experienced employees.

On the other hand, older workers may feel more threatened by economic or technological change than do younger workers. If so, their perceived need to defend their own tenuous positions might increase their rates of job-related instruction. On this argument, a positive relationship between age and participation in training and educational programs and as the result, a better performance in management skills can be anticipated from the older workers.

Cognitive skills, which themselves are part of conceptual skills, are the most fundamental of the leadership skills (Mumford, Campion and Morgeson, 2007). They are comprised of those skills related to capacities, such as collecting, processing, learning, disseminating information, and oral and written communication. These primary skills required for a large portion of the activities in which leaders are engaged such as critical thinking ability and the ability to learn and adapt (Carroll and Gillen, 1987).

Leadership research that has examined activities of managers suggests that the majority of their time is spent performing tasks that draw upon conceptual skills and thus, it is proposed that conceptual skills will be required in greater amounts than the other two skill categories across all levels in the organization (Gillen and Carroll, 1985) and specifically, at higher organizational levels as the environment in which they are used grows more complex, novel, and ill-defined (Mumford and Connelly, 1991).

International research has also found that more educated and skilled workers are more likely to work in occupations with greater cognitive/conceptual skill demands (Farkas, England, Vicknair, and Kilbourne, 1997). In contrast, human capital theory suggests higher levels of education and cognitive skill may enhance worker performance on the job, and lead to higher earnings through higher compensation as a reward for higher productivity among workers holding the same job (Murnane and Levy, 1996). Thus, cognitive skill are valuable as they allow individuals to make substantial vertical “jumps” in the occupational hierarchy rather than small moves that are largely “horizontal” in nature. Based on this argument, the positive relation between more years of management experience and higher scores in conceptual skills of Iranian employees can be explained.

The second level category of leadership skill requirements, is referred to as Interpersonal/Human skill requirements because they involve the interpersonal and social skills relating to interacting with and influencing others (Mumford, Marks, Connelly, Zaccaro and Reiter-Palmon, 2000). This category grows out of what previous research has referred to as social capacities, social judgment, social complexity and differentiation and human relation skills (Mumford et al., 2007). The result of this study illustrates that, Iranian men and women of this sample report an equal and acceptable performance on this task, although older Iranians and those with longer years of management experience perform better than their counterparts.
Nevertheless, this research has shown that Iranian respondents report fairly high scores in all three groups of management skills; therefore, it may be possible to conclude that managers and supervisors should feel comfortable in knowing that most of the Iranian employees are able to perform their tasks based on an acceptable level of managerial skills. Furthermore, this research has found that this fact is more valid for male and older groups of employees and also those who have longer years of management experience.

What is more, it can be suggested that training programs for Iranians be designed to facilitate skill acquisition instead of learning a specific task. Skill training, as contrasted to training for tasks allows for more flexible application (Mumford et al., 2007; Sanchez, 1994). Rapid changes in technology, organizational structures, and jobs, require workers to adapt more quickly to the changing requirements of the job. Tasks may change more rapidly than skill requirements. Skills, even occupationally-specific skills, allow for the learning and application of the skill in a different context. There is also considerable evidence for substantial economic returns on investment in skill enhancement (Bassi, Ludwig, McMurrer, and Buren, 2000). Therefore, skill development programs can be designed in the Iranian context with further emphasis on conceptual skills, which has the greatest importance among management skills and also is the weakest skill reported by Iranian respondents of this study.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are some limitations to this study especially the fact that this study was conducted with a small sample population living in just two cities was a further limitation. Future studies might control this variable by expanding the research population to include more respondents from various locations and provinces in Iran. Perhaps different ethnicities, population groups and people working in various industries can be studied separately to see if culture is truly a factor in the management skills of women (and men) professionals. It is also acknowledged that the convenient sample collected by the authors without any funding is small for a big country like Iran which is very diverse and widespread. The authors would like to clarify that this is rather an initial pilot study, not necessarily representative of an entire country or the culture in Iran since Iranians have years of history and socialization among different people groups living there.

Moreover, the study used a self-report measure (questionnaire) that entails the problems of common method variance and consistency bias. For less biased conclusions, further research is required using alternative methods for data collection, such as interviews combined with self-reported data. In addition, the study was cross-sectional and, therefore, it was difficult to empirically validate the causal effects. A longitudinal study and in-depth interviews with the participants can better explain the relationships between the various aspects of management skills and age, gender and years of management experience.

The authors understand that the results of this study and the analysis would be greatly enhanced if the future researchers expanded the description by comparing age, longevity and gender. This study’s description of results isolated these elements as if they are mutually exclusive. Of course, they are not mutually exclusive and can be impacting a
person’s management skills simultaneously. For example, gaining more management experience, being a female, and being older might all have a significant impact on people’s management skills. As such, it would be of interest to know if it is possible to draw a connection between age and gender, or age and gender and longevity. The latter comparison would be especially interesting given the historical context discussed in this paper.

Conclusion

This study focused on the technical, human and conceptual skills of men and women respondents in Iran. The results show that there are statistically significant differences in the technical, human and conceptual skills reported by Iranian respondents of different age, gender and years of management experience. While gender was only partially supported as a determinative variable, age and management experience were positively related to higher scores on the management skills. Those who would like to be effective leaders in climbing the ladder of leadership should gain as much management experience as possible. This study has also demonstrated that older people tend to report higher scores on the management skills, and, therefore, might make better managers. This study supports the common sense approach of believing that age and experience can help enhance a person’s level of managerial decision making capacity. It is also suggested that skill enhancement programs be designed in the Iranian context with further emphasis on conceptual skills in order to improve Iranians’ managerial capabilities.

References


