A Qualitative Study on Factors Influencing Supervisory Support: An Employee's Perspective

SAAD BASAAD

Faculty of Economics and Administration,
King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.
Email: Somarbasaad@stu.kau.edu.sa

ABDULRAHMAN S. BASAHAL

Faculty of Economics and Administration,
King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.
Email: asbasahal@kau.edu.sa

Abstract

This descriptive qualitative study aims to investigate what factors are associated with a supportive supervisor, from the perspective of an employee. The study is based on the premise that a qualitative investigation of the various factors that influence supervisor support can offer a novel and comprehensive perspective on the topic. This study utilized a qualitative design. Data were collected by means of 20 audio-recorded, semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews with Saudi employees from various business backgrounds. Transcribed interview data were thematically analyzed. Seven themes were developed: professional development opportunities, emotional and family support, regular communication and feedback, team support, recognition, guidance and direction, trust and autonomy. Each theme represents a quality that employees feel a supportive leader should possess. The findings add to the literature on organizational support and can help HR to design training and development sessions for supervisors to improve organizational support and effectiveness.

Keywords: Supervisory Support, Employee Support, Employee-Management Relations, HRD, HRM, and Performance.

Introduction

Supervisors are an integral component of the work environment. Various studies have indicated that there indeed exists an indirect link between supervisory support and organizational effectiveness. This is because employees who feel supported by their supervisor are more likely to be satisfied, are likely to demonstrate high performance levels, and are less inclined to leave a company (Basahal et al., 2022b; Lee, 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2019; Kum et al., 2014; Rathi & Lee, 2017). Contrariwise, employees are less motivated and engaged when they lack the support from their supervisor, which in turn negatively impacts retention rates (Ibrahim et al., 2019). Thus, supervisory support influences employee attitudes within the organization, and can predict organizational effectiveness.

In the context of today's highly competitive and volatile corporate climate, supervisory support has become particularly important. As such, it is crucial for human resource management (HRM) and supervisors to understand how they can ensure a high level of supervisory support within their organizational structure.

Interestingly, according to Saadullah et al. (2020), supervisory support is at least partially dependent on a supervisor's personality. In other words, while guidance and training can be given, being a supportive supervisor is not something that can be taught per se. Defining the required support components is therefore

important as it dictates the type of personality a company should be looking for in a supervisor (Saadullah et al., 2020).

Although much research on the topic exists, qualitative research attempting to identify the elements that describe a supportive supervisor are limited, especially in the Saudi setting. In addition, previous research on this topic has often concentrated on only one component of supervisor support, and it appears that a clear and comprehensive summary of the most relevant aspects on supervisor support is absent. In addition, it is essential to emphasize that the vast majority of studies on this topic are quantitative in nature (e.g., Ibrahim et al., 2019; Kalliath et al., 2020; Kum et al., 2014; Radwan, 2020; Rathi & Lee, 2017; Shu et al., 2018) and are consequently based on preconceived hypotheses. Important information and fresh ideas that might only be discovered through qualitative research may therefore be neglected.

Research Question

This descriptive qualitative study aims to investigate what factors are associated with a supportive supervisor, from the perspective of an employee. The study is based on the assumption that a qualitative exploration of the different factors that influence supervisor support can offer a novel and comprehensive understanding on the topic. The paper's analysis and discussion were driven by the following research question:

RQ1: What factors are associated with a supportive supervisor, from an employee's perspective?

Literature Review

Professional Development opportunities

Most employees appreciate skill development opportunities, and desire their supervisors' support in this (Sawasdee et al., 2020). Human resource development (HRD) opportunities, translating into training and upskilling, are indeed welcomed – especially by career-driven employees – because they keep work interesting for employees and allow for further professional development which employees may benefit from later on in their careers (Antoniu, 2010; Zaharee et al., 2018). Previous studies prove that when professional development opportunities are provided, employees are more engaged at work (Kum et al., 2014; Sawasdee et al., 2020; Tahir et al., 2014). Such training or upskilling opportunities are indeed appreciated by employees and often repaid by being more productive.

In addition to the benefits for employees, Mahamid (2013), Falola et al. (2014), and Kum et al. (2014) also find that there are organizational benefits to offering HRD opportunities, as experience and knowledge increase employee productivity.

Supporting a healthy work-life balance

Work-family enrichment, as defined by Greenhaus and Powell (2006, p. 72) refers to "the extent to which experiences in one role (work or family) improve the quality of life in the other role". Two concepts are crucial here: work-to-family enrichment (WFE) and family-to-work enrichment (FWE). WFE occurs when the quality of an employees' family life is impacted by their work situation; FWE refers to the opposite relationship (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

In both pathways, supervisory support plays an important role (Kalliath et al., 2020). Indeed, with a healthy work-family balance becoming an increasingly important topic internationally in the work space and an asset for organizations who are looking to increase their workforce, supervisors are expected to create a positive employee-supervisor environment in which employees feel comfortable seeking their supervisors' understanding of family/life circumstances (Kalliath et al., 2020). For example, numerous studies have

highlighted the value of work flexibility to employees – often translating into more convenient or less working hours (Darachart, 2019; Karim, 2020; Pencavel, 2016). These same studies have also highlighted how providing employees with such opportunities can increase their commitment to the organization and work productivity. Thus, by being empathetic towards their employees' family/life circumstances, supervisors can actively prevent poor employee productivity and high turnover rates. Although international literature has well-covered the topic, very few of these studies are applicable to the Saudi context.

Communication and Constructive Feedback

Previous work has indicated that employees appreciate regular communication with their supervisors. Such communication gives both supervisors and employees the opportunity to identify and resolve problems, confusions, and uncertainties, together (Ibrahim et al., 2019). Employees appreciate such opportunities as it gives them more control over how they are evaluated by their superiors. By having regular supporting reflective dialogue sessions, employees and supervisors are indeed given the opportunity to engage in a constructive dialogue in which both positive and negative aspects are raised and discussed (Saunila, 2015). Further, such regular communication helps building a positive relationship between both, which subsequently seems to have a positive impact on employees' wellbeing and work engagement (Farid et al., 2022). Kum et al. (2014) made similar conclusions and added that involving employees in discussion and evaluations also helps to keep employees accountable to their expected work responsibilities. Furthermore, such conversations also function as learning opportunities for employees (Mishra & Ghosh, 2020). Ibrahim et al. (2019) note that it is important, though, that during such conversations supervisors do not only highlight the areas where an employee is lacking, but equally emphasize the positive aspects.

Recognition

Supportive supervisors are described as individuals who recognize their employees' accomplishments and hard work (Alshutwi, 2017). While hearing words of appreciation and acknowledgement during formal evaluation is certainly appreciated, it must be noted that a true supportive supervisor does not limit such occasion to these formal settings, but rather extend them to a more frequent basis (Patil et al., 2018). Indeed, recognition is best provided verbally, in a non-formal setting, and on a continuous basis. Patil et al. (2018) found that a simple thank you can already have a positive impact on an employees' motivation and happiness.

According to Baqir et al. (2020) and Patil et al. (2018), the value of recognizing subordinates for a job well done is that it boosts their morale and motivates them to continue working hard for the company. Zeb et al. (2022) add to this, that employees need such recognition in order to feel self-confident and motivated at their workplace. This, in turn, would decrease their intent to leave (Zeb et al., 2022). Being recognized makes employees indeed feel valued and cared for. To express their appreciation to their supervisors for being valued, employee engagement and productivity are likely to remain high, or even increase further. Contrariwise, lack of recognition for a job well done can decrease an employee's motivation, engagement, and eventually lead to job turnover (Baqir et al., 2020).

Direction/Guidance

A supportive supervisor is someone who provides clear direction and guidance. On a company level, this translates into making sure that subordinates know the company goals vision, and strategy (Dermol & Širca, 2018). Having such an understanding is important as it helps employees understand why they are doing their work, and for what purpose (Dermol & Širca, 2018). A study conducted by Ahmed et al. (2019) has highlighted in this regard that perceptions of meaningful work increase employee engagement. Meaningful work, in this sense, must be understood as an employee his or her perceptions of their assigned work responsibilities and tasks being important, valuable, and contributory to the company (Ahmed et al.,

2019). Considering that employees are looking for a sense of purpose, a better idea of where they fit in the company, and how their individual contributions are a crucial piece of the organizational puzzle, being aware of 'the bigger picture' is important, with supervisors playing an important role as communicators and guiders (Dermol & Širca, 2018).

On an individual level, supervisors are also expected to clearly communicate the expectations they have from employees, and ensure they know what tasks fall under their responsibilities. Such communication is crucial – without it, employees may not be able to fulfill their tasks appropriately. Mahamid et al. (2013); Radey and Stanley (2018), and Ibrahim et al. (2019) found that miscommunication and lack of guidance are amongst the most significant factors that impact employee productivity because they can lead to misinterpretation or unclarity of company objectives which then negatively influences employee productivity (Basahal & Hammouda, 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2019; Mahamid, 2013; Mahamid et al., 2013; Radey & Stanley, 2018).

Authoritarian vs. Participatory/Democratic Leadership

A large pool of scientific studies has demonstrated that leadership styles determine the level of supervisory support and can impact employee outcomes including performance (e.g., Althnayan *et al*., 2022; Bajaba *et al.*, 2022; Diana et al., 2021; Fuller *et al.*, 2022; Lee et al., 2019; Shu et al., 2018). While various leadership styles exist, two of the most commonly referenced ones include authoritarian and participatory or democratic leadership (Diana et al., 2021; Radwan, 2020; Shu et al., 2018). The prior refers to a style whereby supervisors/managers make all the decisions and little to no capacity for negotiation/input is left for employees; the latter is an approach whereby employees are included in decision-making and have more room to provide their input (Kibbe, 2019). Both differ in nature and have their own advantages and disadvantages. While authoritarian leadership takes away the pressure on subordinates and often results in fast and clear decision-making (Gu et al., 2020), participatory leadership is more time and energy intensive, requires team members to have meaningful knowledge and expertise, and sometimes results in unclear and/or inconsistent decisions (Kibbe, 2019). On the other hand, the participatory leadership style is said to improve employee morale, commitment, and motivation – aspects which are less commonly associated with the authoritarian method (Kibbe, 2019; Radwan, 2020).

According to Chan (2014), authoritarian leadership types are predominantly found in some Asian countries, as well as in some western nations. Contrariwise, participatory leadership is more often found in western societies. The latter style is also associated more often with the presence of supportive supervisors, which, in this context translates into supervisors who value and take into account the input of their subordinates and emphasize a culture of team work. When such types of support are missing, which according to Shu et al. (2018) is often the case with authoritarian leaders, colleagues are, in their turn, less inclined to support their colleagues.

While in a western context previous studies have highlighted that authoritarian styles of leadership are more than often not appreciated by employees (Schaubroeck et al., 2017), it is unclear whether the same results and views apply to the Saudi context. As such, an investigation into this topic is required.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative design and thematic analysis technique. The purpose of qualitative research is to understand a phenomenon based on the perceptions and daily lives of individuals. As the objective of this study was to comprehend and investigate the factors that Saudi employees associate with supportive supervisors, it was considered that a qualitative methodology would be the most appropriate.

Study Participants

20 Saudi employees from various business backgrounds participated in this research. Table 1. visualizes several essential participant demographics. Throughout the results section, participant numbers will be used to link quotations to participants.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participant Number	Job Title
1	Assistant Manager
2	Senior Officer
3	Associate Officer
4	Specialist
5	Coordinator
6	Senior Trainer
7	Team Leader
8	Researcher
9	Customer Relations Officer
10	Programmer
11	Senior Customer Relations
12	IT Specialist
13	Supply Chain Coordinator
14	Admin Assistant
15	Senior Accountant
16	Customer Service Officer
17	Ground Service Coordinator
18	Consultant
19	Logistics Specialist
20	Government Relations Officer

Data Collection Measures

This study used 20 audio-recorded, semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews to collect data. Due to the fact that semi-structured interview protocols contain open-ended questions and adhere to a general style, they were deemed the most suitable method of data collecting for this study. However, they offer sufficient space for the participant to add his or her own information (Wethington & McDarby, 2015). The researchers planned in advance the main structure of the interview protocol, which contained a series of pre-written questions and broad interview topics (Kallio et al., 2016). Probing was applied on a case-by-case basis, whenever the researcher felt it was needed. To encourage and maintain a smooth and natural conversation with participants, interviews were conducted in the local language (Arabic). Recorded interviews were then transcribed and translated into English in such a way that the colloquial quality of Arabic was preserved (Santos Jr et al., 2015).

Data Analyses

The exact analysis technique used was the six-step thematic analysis procedure outlined in Newson (2022). The six processes include data familiarization, generation of coding, construction of themes, review of prospective themes, identifying and defining themes, and report output. The researcher read and reread the transcripts in order to become familiar with the data. Following this, codes were assigned to text pieces that represented a certain concept. This process was repeated until no additional codes or concepts were discovered. The links between codes were recognized as categories following coding. Subsequently, similar categories were grouped together into subthemes and themes. The researcher reexamined the emergent

categories in light of the data to ensure an accurate depiction of the data in the fourth phase. After identifying themes and subthemes, a report was prepared.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the data resulted in the development of seven themes: professional development opportunities, emotional and family support, regular communication and feedback, team support, recognition, guidance and direction, trust and autonomy. Each theme represents a quality that employees feel a supportive leader should possess. Each of these qualities is explored in depth and supported by participant quotes. It is important to note that the quotations in this paper have been translated from Arabic to English and slightly edited to make sense to an English-speaking audience (Santos et al., 2015).

Professional Development Opportunities

A first important source of support was HRD from within the organization. Being granted training opportunities was found to be important to participants because it allows them to enhance their skill sets and further develop their careers. This, in turn, adds to their self-confidence and perceived self-worth. Feelings of pride and self-accomplishment indeed seem to be important to employees, and professional development seem to be a great means to get there. Although perceived an essential component, many felt such opportunities were lacking in their company, and their supervisors were not playing an active role in offering training possibilities.

> *There do not appear to be any efforts being made by the organization to improve its existing pool of human resources. In my organization, there is zero consideration given to training and professional advancement. The question now is how my boss can help me with this particular matter. [14].*

Others testified that when training opportunities are given, they are not given to everyone but only a pool of very specific people – often those in higher positions - which is discouraging and perceived as unfair. For these employees, this is a source of frustration.

> *Unfortunately, only a few members of our team are eligible for the training opportunities provided by our supervisor. Yet it is expected of him to be equal [6].*

One possible explanation, according to some, can be found in the practice of nepotism/favoritism. Indeed, some participants believe that only those employees who have strong relationships with their superiors are given possibilities to take up training.

> *When it comes to the amount of support that was provided by our supervisor, I can see that I receive significantly less than my colleagues do. We all perform the same tasks, and it's possible that I'm more skilled than the other people. They are given priority, however, because there is a certain chemistry between them and the supervisor [19].*

However, not all participants perceive the unequal offering of HRD opportunities as unfair as they believe that not all job roles and/or individuals require training. For example, they believe that already skilled individuals should not be a priority when it comes to training opportunities. A such, they support their supervisor's decision to only provide such opportunities to those employees who need training in order to complete their job tasks:

> *He is correct in his assertion that there are certain categories of work that call for specific skill sets in order to be successful. Without it, I would not have been able to accomplish anything [2].*

Emotional and family support

Employees expect support from supervisors when it comes to personal issues – and particularly family-related circumstances. Specifically, two aspects are important here: the provision of (1) emotional support and (2) work flexibility. Regarding the former, our results suggest that employees expect supervisors to be understanding of their personal issues and lower their expectations during such times. Unfortunately, many felt this aspect is often lacking and supervisors are not always understanding of how employee productivity may temporarily be impacted by person issues.

> *When I had a special situation with my family, I tried to explain to my supervisor how it affected my emotions and how I needed his understanding [...] When I'm feeling depressed, it's nearly impossible for me to act normally unless I give myself enough time to recover; the people around me should keep this in mind [1].*

Besides emotional support, employees also mention that they would appreciate a supervisor who is sympathetic towards employees' family circumstances and is willing to support them when family duties arise. This could be achieved by for example giving time off from work when necessary, or offering the possibility for flexible working hours. Such support is especially valued by employees with young children. Unfortunately, it seems that work flexibility is often not regarded as an option by supervisors, to many employees' frustration:

> *Before I found a childcare center that was appropriate for my child, I was having a disagreement with my supervisor because he did not take into account the circumstances that required me to leave early or arrive late at work. It would be a huge help if he could make it so that I could adjust my working hours in accordance with the circumstances of my case [1].*

Some participants recognize that such decisions are unfortunately sometimes out of the control of supervisors as company structures and policies may prevent work flexibility arrangements. Policies can indeed significantly impact supervisors' abilities to support their subordinates; when such policies are in an employee's favor and supervisors are prepared to offer the needed support, employees feel lucky:

> *After my marriage ended in divorce, I was granted custody of my children. As a result, I required the assistance and flexibility of my supervisor. Because of the policies that allow him the freedom to make such a decision; thanks to those policies [5].*

Regular communication and feedback

Regular communication is considered a great source of support as it allows employees to learn, raise concerns/uncertainties, and find solutions to problems together with their supervisors in a productive and constructive manner. During such conversations, employees expect to receive both positive and negative feedback so they can have an exact idea of the areas in which they are doing well, as well as those where there is room for improvement. Such feedback is especially valuable to employees who are eager to learn and are driven to learn and further development themselves.

> *Both positive and negative feedback on a consistent basis is important to me because they provide me with an indication of my performance and areas in which I can improve [3].*

In addition, regular communication is also believed to improve supervisor-employee relationships. This is because such conversations are held in confidence and allow both parties to share potentially sensitive and personal information with one another. As such, it strengthens the connection and also helps to build respect for one another.

If my supervisor is able to provide me with professional coaching and monitor my progress closely, I believe that our working relationship will improve, and that he will understand me better than he does now [12].

Knowing that their supervisors are investing their time in them, employees feel valued and are inclined to demonstrated their appreciation for their supervisors' support by being highly productive.

I have worked in a variety of roles in the past, the majority of which were overseen by supervisors who were not supportive, which led to conflict and resulted in my looking for other employment. Having said that, now that I have finally found a supervisor who is supportive of me and my work, I am willing to devote more time and effort to my job [5].

Team Support

Good teamwork is paramount and participant feel that supervisors must play an active role in stimulating such. Amongst other things, supervisors are expected to coordinate team tasks and provide support where required. This is necessary because successful teamwork is what leads to success and ensures deadlines can be met appropriately:

I believe that increasing overall team productivity is the primary objective of the support provided by supervisors. Because of this, the work will be completed in an appropriate manner [1].

In addition, a good and supportive supervisor is described as someone who engages with their team and positions themselves as a team member, thus not creating too much distance between themselves and their subordinates. While they are the team leader, the stimulation of a friendly and collaborative team environment is key. This translates into supervisors being open to the concerns and suggestions from their subordinates and organize expectations around such. Thus, they are responsible for managing work pressures and making timeline feasible. Flexibility and openness are therefore required.

My supervisor is the one who is responsible for managing the pressure that his subordinates and team members put him under. He ensured that the situation was fair and balanced [4].

Unfortunately, some feel supervisors are not always knowledgeable/well-informed about how long certain tasks take, and are unprepared to be flexible. When supervisors are not prepared to listen to their employees and accept that certain timelines are not feasible, they are considered highly unsupportive:

Sometimes I get the impression that my supervisor does not comprehend how difficult that task is that I am responsible for, and he sets a very tight timeframe even though we (as a department) are not committed to a deadline for submission. This makes me feel like I am being taken advantage of [4].

Although the above supportive measures are certainly said to benefit employee, teams, and the company overall, participants also feel that supervisors gain personal benefit from supporting the team as it will reflect positively on them and contribute to their career aspirations:

When my supervisor backs me and the rest of my team, I have no doubt that we will be successful in achieving our goal. Because of this, it will have a positive impact on both his career and his reputation [2].

Recognition

Recognition is a crucial component to successful supervisory support. With work pressure being high and specific skills often being needed to fulfill certain tasks, participants feel that recognition from their

supervisor is needed to keep them motivated. This is especially true when an employee feels that they have done a good job. When they do not receive the desired recognition, their motivation tends to drop and this is visible in their work:

My job requires me to think creatively in order to produce highly competitive and excellent results, and I enjoy the challenge. I am a graphic designer who specializes in marketing posts, but I almost never get credit for what I do. When I am not motivated, I am able to see the difference in the results I get [20].

Even more frustrating, according to participants, is the situation whereby a supervisor only pays attention to mistakes. Such supervisors are said to be oblivious to positive aspects and are considered highly unsupportive:

It took me several long days of laborious work, especially because I had to deal with a large number of numbers. My supervisor was upset about a minor error I made, and as a result, she forgot about anything positive I had provided in relation to this task [15].

Another participant added a similar negative experience and pointed out how they are missing the deserved recognition from their supervisor:

This is my fourth year working in the information technology department, and I honestly can't remember the last time my supervisor gave me any positive feedback or encouragement. When I do a good job, she acts neutral and does not engorge herself with praise, but she is quick to point out my mistakes [10].

Others testified to a completely different experience and shared more positive experiences. These participants believed that the level/frequency of recognition depends on how well they perform their job responsibilities.

Because of how well I perform my job responsibilities, my supervisor not only supports me in a variety of areas, but he also supports me more than any of my coworkers [14].

Guidance and Direction

Supervisory support also translates into ensuring subordinates have a clear understanding of the company goals and team objectives. When this is not the case, chaos emerges which reflects badly on the company and supervisors themselves. Indeed, the lack of alignment on goals and objectives can prevent fruitful collaboration and instead create division and conflict. This, in turn, creates a hostile and unfriendly environment between different individuals and can cause subordinates to feel uncomfortable.

The issue that we are dealing with in this department is that we do not comprehend the path that the company is taking. It resulted in ambiguity and conflict. [17].

To avoid such, supervisors must provide clear guidance and direction to subordinates. However, it seems that this is not possible when supervisors themselves are not supported by their superiors.

I can say with absolute certainty that the top management is unable to effectively align with the managers of the departments. Additionally, my boss is having a difficult time at the moment. However, we are in need of support as well. Although we do understand his situation [8].

A crucial prerequisite to effective guidance and direction is that supervisors are competent themselves. In order to successfully support subordinates, it is indeed important that supervisors understand their own

responsibilities first. If supervisors are unable to fulfill their own responsibilities, they are unlikely to have the ability to effectively support their subordinates. In addition, it also seems that when supervisors are perceived as incapable, subordinates are less likely to trust them and go to them for support.

It was very challenging for me to observe my supervisor stumbling through his responsibilities, and it was abundantly clear to me that he does not make preparations ahead of time. In point of fact, he was searching for easy victories [20].

In addition, it also seems that when supervisors are perceived as incapable, subordinates are less likely to trust them and go to them for support.

It came as a surprise to me when I was first hired for the position of supply chain coordinator where I am currently working because I found out that my supervisor asks for my assistance with his own tasks. After some time, I came to the realization that he does not have sufficient knowledge or experience for the role that he is performing [13].

Trust and Autonomy

When it comes to the relationship that exists between an employee and his supervisor, trust is always an essential component. Feeling trusted by their supervisors can indeed increase an employee's self-confidence which in turn impacts positively on their productivity. Hence, communicating and giving subordinates a level of trust and autonomy benefits both supervisors and their subordinates.

When I was in charge of the operations department, I honestly felt crushed by the quantity of work and the level of expertise that was expected of me. But when my supervisor took the time to tell me how much he trusts and believes in me, I finally felt the self-assurance I required at that point [7].

Another argument for allowing subordinates a certain level of autonomy is that it facilitates and speeds up the completion of certain tasks that would otherwise require certain approvals. Too many levels of control and approval can indeed work against productivity and lead to poor outcomes and processes.

I have made multiple requests to the supervisor in order to be granted access to the data that I require. My request has been turned down by him. He gave me the impression that I do not possess the necessary experience or qualifications to handle such a responsibility. I did not continue to pursue the data, and I maintained the process in its previous state [18].

Unfortunately, it seems that supervisors struggle with being trustful of their employees, which can cause long unnecessary processes and frustrations on both sides. This can then hurt the relationship between supervisors and subordinates.

My supervisor and I went through a number of revisions in order to reach an agreement that would grant me the authority to alter the store's operations plan. After what seemed like an eternity, I was finally given the approval and authority I needed to show him that he was wrong. He was able to observe the results of my output [16].

The advantage of giving subordinates some autonomy is that it can take away some of the pressure on the supervisor, as responsibilities are shared and decisions are made together. This approach is also beneficial for the subordinate-supervisor relationship because it makes subordinates feel valued, included, and motivated to prove that they can indeed be trusted.

My boss and I sit down once a week for a meeting during which we go over the specifics of the work and brainstorm ways in which we can make it better. When coming up with new concepts, we used to make use of various tools and techniques [18].

Discussion and Implications

This descriptive qualitative study aimed to investigate what factors are associated with a supportive supervisor, from the perspective of an employee. The study was based on the assumption that a qualitative inquiry of the components that influence supervisor support can offer a novel and comprehensive point of view on the subject. Data for this study were collected utilizing 20 semi-structured individual in-depth interviews with Saudi individuals from various businesses backgrounds. Interviews were then transcribed and analysed thematically, and resulted in the development of seven themes: professional development opportunities, emotional and family support, regular communication and feedback, team support, recognition, guidance and direction, and trust and autonomy.

A first theme relates to HRD opportunities. Our findings suggest that, although perceived valuable and a welcomed source of support, training opportunities seem to be given relatively sporadically by supervisors. Specifically, we find that nepotism is a concern among employees, with some believing that only those employees who have a good relationship with their supervisor are being given professional development opportunities. Others disagree and do not feel nepotism plays a role; rather, they feel that such opportunities are only given to those employees who really need the training to complete their job tasks. Regardless of whether nepotism plays a role or not, these findings suggest a clear need for supervisors to work on their relationships with their subordinates, and for organizations to consider offering more training possibilities to their employees. Indeed, such opportunities seem to be expected. However, such opportunities are currently lacking in degree and extent, and suggest a need for companies to review their policy and strategy towards the provision of training to employees. This would be particularly beneficial considering that being given professional development opportunities helps motivate employees and increase their productivity, as has been highlighted I previous studies (e.g., Falola et al., 2014; Kum et al., 2014; Zaharee et al., 2018).

A second set of findings relates to the provision of emotional and family support. Our results suggest that employees expect supervisors to be understanding of their personal issues and lower their expectations of these subordinates' productivity during such times. Unfortunately, our results indicate that many employees feel this aspect is often lacking and supervisors are not always understanding and accepting of impacted employee productivity during such difficult times. However, as indicated in the literature, it seems that providing such employees with the required emotional support would be in a supervisor's best interest as feeling emotionally supported positively impacts employee engagement, productivity, and loyalty (Kalliath et al., 2020). With this in mind, we recommend for companies to organize training sessions for their supervisors in which the necessity and benefits of providing emotional support for employees are highlighted. A need for such training sessions has also been highlighted in previous studies (e.g.,Ibrahim et al., 2019), emphasizing the need for action in this regard.

Besides emotional support, we also find that an understanding for family circumstances through offering flexible working hours is a desired form of support. However, whether or not a supervisor will support an employee's application for flexible working hours will depend significantly on organizational structures and policies. Indeed, if such policies do not allow supervisors to make these decisions, the likelihood for supervisor to support their employees in this regard will decrease substantially. With the option for flexible working hours seemingly becoming more attractive and desirable to employees – especially to those with young children, (Basahal et al 2021a; Darachart, 2019; Karim, 2020; Pencavel, 2016) it may be wise for organizations who do not offer such options yet to revise their policies in such a way that it allows supervisors to offer this type of support. Especially with the dual earner model becoming more popular in Saudi Arabia (Al Abdulkarim, 2018), there is an opportunity for both supervisors and organizations to

advertise such options to their employees as it may increase retention rates and attract new, skilled employees.

A third theme was formed based on statements relating to regular communication and feedback. Our results suggest that regular communication is strongly appreciated as it allows employees to raise concerns/uncertainties and find solutions to problems together with their supervisors in a productive and constructive manner. These findings are in alignment with those from Ibrahim et al. (2019). Further, our participants also view this as an excellent learning opportunity as they get to discuss with their supervisors in which areas they still need to improve, as has been similarly highlighted by Mishra and Ghosh (2020). Such feedback is especially valuable to employees who are eager to learn and are driven to further development themselves. In addition, we also find evidence that through regular communication supervisor-employee relationships can be improved. Knowing that their supervisors are investing their time in them, employees feel valued and are inclined to demonstrated their appreciation for their supervisors' support by being highly productive.

A fourth theme relates to team support. In this regard, our data suggests that supervisors are expected to support their team and must do so by taking an active role in making sure team objectives are met. This requires them to engage with their team and identify potential issues early on. Where /when required, they must offer their support to their team. With unanticipated issues not being uncommon to arise, supportive supervisors are expected to be flexible and prepared to change timelines and plans when necessary, so that tasks and deadlines can become manageable for the team. However, our results suggest that communication gaps between the team and supervisors still occur and some supervisors are unwilling to listen to and take feedback to heart from their subordinates. This perceived lack of communication is discouraging to employees and works counterproductively. Indeed, further implications are that team members have to work with unfeasible timelines which then results in poor product delivery. As this reflects badly not only on the team, but also on the supervisor, it is in the latter's best interest to improve their communication with, and act on concerns communicated by the team. For example, supervisors could organize weekly meetings with their team members – both in a group format a well as individually. This would allow them to remain up-to-date about project progress and ensure a good relationship with their team members, which is key to team productivity.

A fifth source of supervisory support can be achieved through recognition. Our findings suggest that recognition is crucial, especially when employees feel they have done a good job. Specifically, we find that employees desire regular acknowledgment from their supervisors, especially provided the high work pressure and special skillsets required from employees. Although or study did not highlight why gaining recognition is so important to employees, following the findings from Zeb et al. (2022) it seems plausible that employees need such recognition in order to feel self-confident and motivated at their workplace. Unfortunately, our finding suggest that such support is often lacking in Saudi organizations, with some supervisors only engaging with their subordinates when they have made mistakes. When supervisors consistently fail to provide positive feedback, subordinates feel undervalued and less motivated. This then negatively reflects on their work, findings which are consistent with those of Baqir et al. (2020). Such decreased motivation and productivity ultimately damage the reputation of their supervisor, and in the long run may hurt the company. As such, supervisors and organizations need to reconsider the way they communicate with their employees and ensure that proper recognition is given on a regular basis.

A sixth source of supervisory support relates to ensuring subordinates have a clear understanding of the company goals and team objectives. In alignment with findings from previous studies (e.g., Ibrahim et al., 2019; Radey & Stanley, 2018), we find that in order to ensure that subordinates are motivated and can effectively fulfill their task roles, alignment on company goals and objectives is paramount. When such alignment is lacking, unclarity, division, and conflict can emerge. A crucial prerequisite to effective guidance and direction is that supervisors are competent themselves. In order to successfully support subordinates, it is indeed important that supervisors understand their own responsibilities first. If

supervisors are unable to fulfill their own responsibilities, they are unlikely to have the ability to effectively support their subordinates. In addition, it also seems that when supervisors are perceived as incapable, subordinates are less likely to trust them and go to them for support. With these findings in mind, we suggest that organizations should organize regular training sessions for their supervisors regarding the company goals and supervisors' responsibilities. It is anticipated that when supervisors are better trained, they will be able to provide better support to their subordinates.

A seventh and last theme, to conclude, indicates that supervisory support can be demonstrated by allowing subordinates a certain level of autonomy. Our results suggest that when employees feel trusted by their supervisors and are granted a certain level of autonomy, they indeed feel supported because they are implicitly recognized for their work, and granted the opportunity to further develop themselves without too much supervision. Experiencing such support is highly appreciated and makes subordinates feel more connected with their supervisor. In addition, feeling trusted intrinsically motivates them to prove to their supervisor that they can indeed be trusted with certain responsibilities. As a result, subordinates tend to be more productive. These study findings are consistent with those from Kibbe (2019) and Radwan (2020), and suggest that Saudi employees are more in favor of a democratic/participatory leadership model. These are interesting findings, especially in light of the authoritarian leadership style being more commonly used in the Islamic words, according to Chan (2014).

In addition to the previous, our study results implicate that through giving subordinates some autonomy, certain bureaucratic steps can be skipped, which facilitates and speeds up processes that would otherwise require certain approvals. These findings prove the value of supervisors trusting their subordinates and how such trust can be interpreted as support.

Although the effects of trust and autonomy can provide clear benefits, out findings suggest that Saudi supervisors often struggle with giving their subordinates autonomy. A potential explanation could be that, as mentioned earlier, Middle Eastern companies often follow the authoritarian leadership model and it feels unnatural to them to give others decision-power (Chan, 2014). However, this assumption cannot be confirmed and more research is required to understand why trust and autonomy seem to be less attractive to the Saudi context.

Conclusions and Limitations

The results of this study build on the HRM literature and add a fresh qualitative perspective on factors Saudi employees associate with good supervisory support. However, the application of a qualitative methodology inherently comes with particular limitations because of their highly subjective and interpretative nature, lack of statistical reliability, and relatively small sample sizes.

The subjective nature of qualitative studies makes that results are non-quantifiable and prone to a researcher's bias. Research bias refers to the possibility of the researcher unintentionally interpreting the data in such a way that their personal hypothesis is confirmed, or only analysing data that he or she thinks is relevant (Johnson et al., 2020). Recognizing these risks, the researcher collaborated with an independent qualitative researcher to verify their analysis methods, data interpretation, and results. Although these measures are believed to have limited the potential negative impact of researcher bias, it is important to acknowledge a certain level of bias may still be present in this study, considering that qualitative studies remain subjective in nature. Their non-quantifiable nature increases the probability of a different representation of the results, should another researcher have carried out this study. We therefore recommend for future researchers to re-analyze the results of this study and collect additional data.

This study was also limited by its relatively small sample size, with only the views and experiences of 20 Saudi employees from various business backgrounds being captured. A sample size of 20 participants is not considered representative for the wider population and as such it is important that these results are not

generalized but rather interpreted as potential explanations and perceptions of Saudi employees. It is indeed possible that if a different sample of individuals was interviewed, other results may have been obtained. To make the results of the current study more representative to the wider population, it might be interesting to replicate the study with a larger sample size and apply a mixed-methods methodology, which can provide statistical reliability while at the same time offering an in-depth understanding of the results.

To conclude, we argue that although this paper offers a proper overview of the most important factors that describe a supportive supervisor, some themes require a more in-depth exploration. As such, it might be of value to zoom in deeper on a particular set of factors; for example, the role of the value and relevance of trust between supervisors and subordinates.

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