

## SUMMARY

When financial crises strike governments, the first departments that usually witness sharp budgetary cuts are the ones in charge of training. If the impact of the budgetary cuts on training practices and organizational performance are left unexamined, governments risk lowering the effectiveness of their employees and efficiency of their service delivery. This policy brief assesses the repercussions of the recent financial crisis (2009) on the training budgets and practices of key government entities in the Emirate of Dubai. To properly evaluate the impact and response of the different entities to the cuts in their training budgets, this brief compares the experiences of the private and public sector entities in the U.S. and U.K. with that of Dubai. The brief concludes that, despite the budgetary limitations, the training departments in Dubai's public sector, like those in the U.K., successfully managed to come up with innovative and low-cost ways to secure high quality and equity of the provided training programs.



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# Training During Times of Financial Constraints: Lessons from the Case of Dubai's Public Sector\*

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## Introduction to the 1st Training Policy Brief in the Series

This is the first in a series of three policy briefs that examine the relationship between training practices/effectiveness and organizational performance in Dubai's public sector. The study is based on comprehensive primary data that were gathered from the majority of public sector entities within the Emirate of Dubai. First, semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted with Human Resources and training directors from 17 main government entities in Dubai. Second, a survey instrument was developed and sent out to all public organizations in Dubai. Out of the 60 surveys sent out, 49 were filled-out and returned representing a significant response rate of 81%. To the knowledge of the authors, this is the first high magnitude study ever conducted that covers the topic of training in UAE's public sector.

## Introduction

Public sector organizations are compelled by the challenges inherent in the rapidly changing career and organizational practices of the 21st century to provide their employees with effective and up-to-date training programs. Training public sector employees is a tool that enhances their practical and social skills, improves the manner in which goals are accomplished, and delivers a higher level of effective and efficient service to the public. A growing body of literature proves that properly designed and implemented training programs enhance employees' productivity, strengthen their organizational loyalty, and create a culture of learning and teamwork. But the quality and content of the delivered training programs rely significantly on the allocated training budgets. Conventional wisdom has shown that the combination of recession and financial constraints hinder the capacity of government training departments to deliver high quality and efficient training programs. However, the recent financial crisis proved that while substantial reductions had been made to the training budgets in the countries affected by the crisis, the effect only fostered an environment of strategic thinking and innovation to deliver the much needed high quality training programs with fewer resources.

\* Surveyed and interviewed organizations include: The Dubai's Executive Council, Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA), Dubai Economic Department, Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dubai Public Prosecution, Department of Tourism, Dubai Health Authority, Dubai Municipality, Dubai Statistics' Office, Dubai Media, Dubai Customs, Dubai Land Department, Dubai Airports, Dubai Corporation of Ambulance Services, Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, Road and Transport Authority (RTA), Knowledge and Human Development Authority, Mohammed bin Rashid Establishment.

The lack of research in human resource management in the MENA region weakens the Gulf states' efforts to improve the performance of their national work force. In fact, what makes this kind of research very important in the Gulf is the effect of the dominant expatriate workforce over those nationally-born. In the UAE, for example, the foreigners account for over 80 percent of the overall workforce (UAE National Bureau of Statistics 2010). This is a critical issue since the UAE has implemented nationalization, or Emiratization, policies that aim to strengthen the integration of national talents in the local job markets. However, due to the lack of research that examines the strengths and weaknesses of the national workforce, their training needs, and career development, it is challenging for the government to fully benefit from its Emiratization policy. More importantly, the financial crisis and the way it is reshaping the economic and financial foundations around the world have resulted in numerous negative consequences in the Gulf countries. It has caused high rates of turnover and departure of skilled talents from the UAE, especially from the Emirate of Dubai. Hence, there is a dire need for research to examine these issues and to analyze the impact of the financial crisis on the training effectiveness in Dubai and its impact on organizational performance.

In its drive to shift its economy from relying on natural resources like oil and gas, to one that is based on knowledge and innovation, the UAE has invested heavily in promoting a culture of continuous learning in both its private and public sectors. The government of Dubai generously supports the training of its public sector employees as levers of innovation and change. This policy brief examines the training practices within Dubai, especially the implications of the recent financial crisis on training practices. It assesses the impact of the crisis on the training budget, and the methods utilized by various entities within the Emirate of Dubai. The main conclusion of this brief is that the financial constraints compelled Human Resources and training directors to act strategically in identifying innovative and

low-cost ways to provide high quality training. Unnecessary spending on some training programs was eliminated and only ones crucial for the survival and growth of these organizations were kept.

### **Training public sector employees: Definition and management during times of financial crises**

There are numerous definitions of the word 'training' that apply to both the private and public sectors. However, these definitions focus on the new knowledge and behavior that employees need to learn to enhance their performance levels and efficiency in the way they conduct their duties within their organizations. For example, Noe (1986) defines training as "a planned effort by a company to facilitate the employees' learning of job related competencies. These competencies include knowledge, skills, or behaviors that are critical for successful job performance." (p. 3). As Wexley and Latham (1995) indicate, training is not only restricted to learning new information or knowledge but also new social skills that they might not necessarily possess when they first join their organizations. The U.N. Handbook of Training (1966) defines training in public sector organizations as "instruction in an art, a profession, or an occupation, consisting of coaching, drill or discipline by which powers of mind or body are developed... with particular reference to the civil service, training is the reciprocal process of teaching and learning a body of knowledge and the related methods of work." (p. 15).

The goals of training programs differ from one organization to another and are based on their strategic priorities and organizational needs. Yet there are three major goals that all organizations aim to achieve from training programs: 1) improvement of an individual's level of self-awareness, 2) increasing an individual's skill in one or more areas of expertise, and 3) enhancing the employee's motivation to perform their job, Wexley and Latham (1995). These training goals are strategically categorized to build

self-awareness (strengths and weaknesses), new theoretical and practical skills, and, more importantly, the psychological readiness of employees to perform their duties effectively. Generally speaking, training provides employees with the necessary tools to enhance their effectiveness in their current jobs and prepares them for promotional opportunities or future jobs. This takes place through the learning of new conceptual, procedural, and behavioral skills that reflect on the performance and outcomes of an organization as a whole. In fact, Noe (1995) indicates that training should be regarded as a means to not only improve the performance of the employees, but to also create an intellectual capital that can be kept within the organization's memory. Intellectual capital includes both 'basic knowledge' like the required skills to perform a certain job and 'advanced knowledge' which necessitates the use of technology to share information and knowledge with other employees.

When public sector entities are faced with financial challenges and crises, the training budget is usually the first to be cut to reduce costs, Sims and Sims (1994). This could be either a blessing or a curse on organizations. If training departments follow a systematic and well-designed plan to reduce the costs of training and use innovative ways to deliver training programs, they could succeed in preserving the quality of training while reducing the costs. However, if such a plan is not put into practice, the organizations might risk lowering the effectiveness of their training programs that might inevitably reflect negatively on the overall organizational performance.

Sims and Sims (1994) established a framework to help public sector training departments maximize the efficiency of managing their training budgets while keeping equity and quality of their programs intact. This framework should be applied before making any decisions about what costs or activities the training department needs to cut. The framework consists of three processes which analyze the training department's key resource areas, like the financial, human, and support. Training

managers should look at how their training budgets were previously designed and prioritize them according to the strategic objectives of the organization. Unnecessary training programs and costs like traveling abroad for training purposes should be minimized or cut and only training programs that help the organization achieve its strategic objectives be kept. Concerning the human resources area, training managers should carefully identify the urgent and crucial training needs of their employees and ascertain that they identify ways to provide them at low cost to enable employees to maintain high quality and efficient work productivity. Supportive resources include the equipment and training facilities used to provide training programs. Evaluating their costs and assessing their impact is essential to decide what to cut and what to keep. The second process involves selecting an effective plan of action to carry out cutbacks in the financial, human, and supportive components of the training departments. This should be done with the involvement of employees from different sectors within the organization to ensure efficiency and equity. New ways to deliver on-the-job training should be identified and knowledgeable and capable senior employees should be nominated to provide them. The third process includes continuous evaluation of the previous two factors to ensure that economically feasible, high quality training programs are delivered within the organization.

### **Overview of the impact of the financial crisis on training budgets in Europe and the USA**

The financial crisis of late 2007 has resulted in major changes in the training practices and budgets of both the public and private organizations in Europe and the United States. To use the United Kingdom's public sector as an example, most of its government entities in 2009 and 2010 had to revisit their training strategies and substantially cut their training budgets. According to the Chartered Institute Personnel and Development's (CIPD) Employee Outlook and Human Resources Outlook Surveys of 2010, 88% of the surveyed public sector entities indicated that managing costs was their

main organizational priority in the coming 12 months. 45% of these organizations indicated that they cut their training budgets in 2009, and 65% stated that they froze hiring. When asked what they expected to happen to their training budget in 2010, 64% of the respondents stated that it would decline, while only 24% anticipated it to remain unchanged (Local Government Workforce Survey 2010). The latest figures of CIPD's survey in 2011 concluded that of the 601 public organizations polled, 78% of public sector managers indicated that they had fewer resources for training than in 2010, and they expected the figures to be lower in 2012, Smith (2012). However, despite the cuts in the training budgets, an advisor of CIPD stated that more efficient and economical ways of delivering training programs were taking place to preserve the quality of training. The private sector in the U.K. witnessed only a drop of 4% in the training budgets of 2009. This might be due to the nature of the private sector that makes training an instrumental element in maintaining a competitive advantage in the market in order to secure higher returns on its investment. Both the public and private sector organizations in the U.K. have developed new training delivery methods in which 70% of the learning took place through on-the-job experience and 20% through coaching, mentoring and social networking channels. Only 10% indicated that they offered training courses through formal training formats, O'Leonard (2010).

In the U.S., the training budget of private sector entities continues to decrease. In 2009 it was cut by 11%, which is in addition to the 10% decrease in 2008. This means that private sector training budgets decreased by 21% in just two years, O'Leonard (2009). U.S. organizations also invest less in formal training and foster the use of web-based training, coaching, mentoring and encourage more knowledge-sharing and training conducted by senior employees within their organizations. The annual training hours per learner dropped from 32 hours in 2006 to only 13 hours in 2009, O'Leonard (2010). Mandatory and compliance-related training programs were the main ones conducted by these organizations. Concerning the training budget of government entities in the U.S., 49% of the surveyed

organizations indicated that their budgets were decreased, while only 27% stated that their budgets remained the same, and 24% said it increased in 2010. The decrease in the training budget was around 6% to 15% in the majority of surveyed organizations and it affected mostly programs involving travel to attend out of house learning activities like international conferences and seminars, resulting in a reduction of 41%, Training Industry Report (2010). However, the key priority of these organizations was to secure the effectiveness of their training programs and at the same time reduce costs. As is the case with U.K. organizations, U.S. organizations also currently rely more on virtual and web-based training programs. From 2008 to 2009, the use of virtual classroom tools increased from 45% to 59%, O'Leonard (2009). More specifically, 61% of U.S. private organizations used online training like video broadcasting and virtual classrooms for mandatory training programs and compliance training, Training Industry Report (2010).

### **Training practices in Dubai's public sector**

In an attempt to achieve one of its strategic goals of becoming amongst the most effective governments in the world, the government of the UAE, Dubai in particular, recognized public sector training as a strategic priority. It has invested generously in developing and equipping its public sector employees with the skills and behavioral practices necessary to make this vision a reality. This is clearly reflected in including training and human capital development as an enabler for achieving the government's strategic plan, UAE Government Strategy (2011-2013). Moreover, Dubai's Human Resources Law stresses the importance of providing sufficient training courses to all government employees regardless of their position or rank within their respective organizations.

The results of the extensive survey conducted for this study shows that training is provided equally to all employees across various hierarchies within the government of Dubai, albeit with slight differences in the number of days of training offered per year. As Figure 1 indicates, 5 days

of training per year were typically provided to administrators (44%), senior staff (41%) and government officers (38%). Mid-management, such as heads of departments and managers, attended 6 to 10 days of training per year which accounted for 52% of training programs offered in this time period, while only 36%, 33% and 31% respectively were offered to administrators, officers and senior staff. Less than 20% of senior staff members attended 11 to 20 days of training per year. However, less than 10% of respondents indicated that they either enjoyed up to 30 days of training per year or did not have training days at all. The results of Figure 1 demonstrate that the majority of government officials had up to 5 days of training in the previous year. This is also the same number of days OECD public servants get per year, OECD (1992). Moreover, the government of Dubai currently provides more training than private sector companies which offer around 13 hours of training per year.

The Human Resources./training directors who answered the surveys were asked to evaluate to what extent their training programs were successful in improving the skills and abilities of their employees. Figure 2 demonstrates that only 15% of the respondents considered the

training programs very successful in achieving the desired results, while 56% considered them only successful.

Around 27% stated that training was somewhat successful in achieving its expected results and 2% stated that the training was unsuccessful. An overall 71% of the respondents were content with the results of the training programs in general, whereas 29% seemed skeptical about the effectiveness of training in improving the skills and abilities of their employees.

### The impact of the financial crisis on Dubai’s government training budget and practices

Dubai’s economy was not immune to the global recession that hit the world in 2007 and its repercussions were felt in varying degrees by all public sector entities. As was the case with private and public sector entities in the U.S. and the U.K., the training departments were among the first to witness cuts in their annual budgets. This new financial environment compelled the training and Human Resources directors in the government of Dubai to rethink their training strategies and practices and prioritize their training programs.

Figure 1: Days of training offered to different staff categories in the Government of Dubai

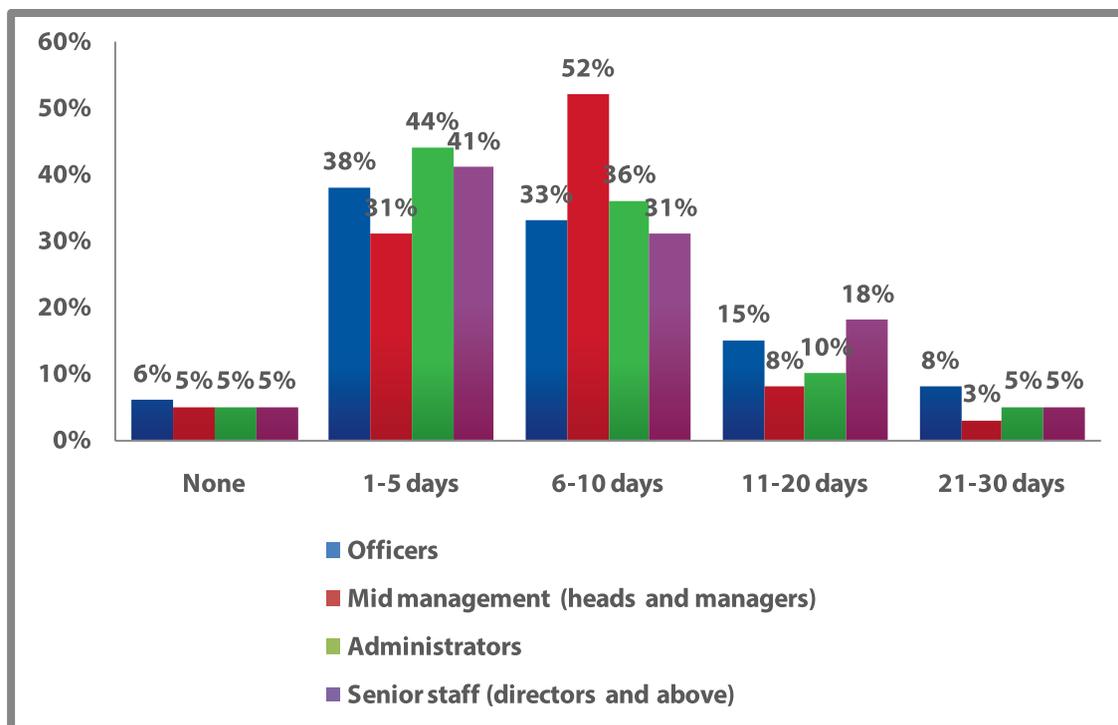
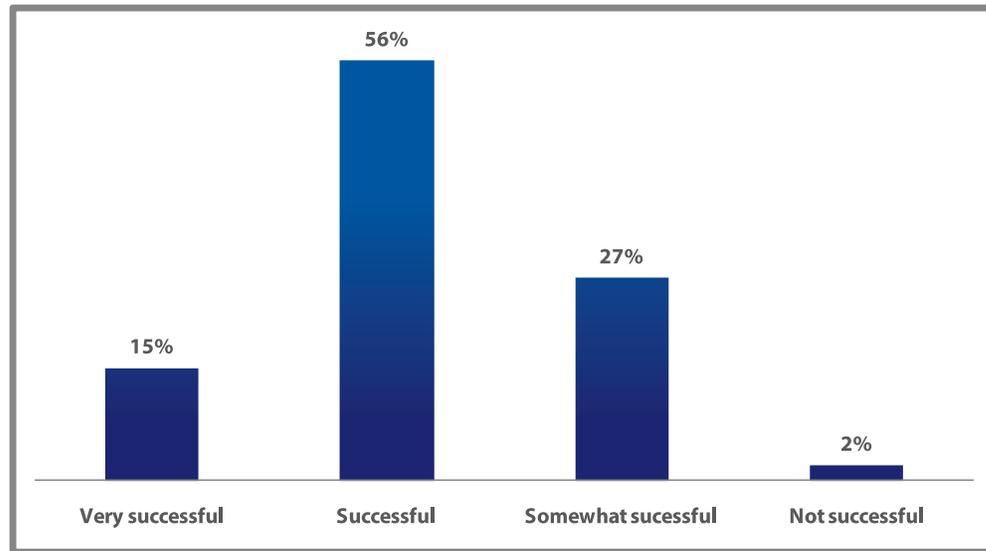


Figure 2: The success of training programs in improving the skills and abilities of government employees



In order to properly assess the extent to which Dubai’s training budget was affected by the economic downturn, it is essential to trace the growth of this budget in the last few years. New data was obtained from the Dubai’s Department of Finance for this purpose. As Figure 3 demonstrates, the training and scholarship budget allocated by the Department of Finance for all the government entities in 2005 was only 55 million AED. This amount grew by 2% in 2006 to reach 56 million, and by 24% the year after to reach 69 million. However, in 2008, the training budget grew by an exponential 105% from the previous year to reach 142 million. The substantial growth of the training budget from 2007 to 2008 was due to the realization and commitment of Dubai’s government leadership to equip its employees with the best practices in service delivery. Furthermore, other factors like the phenomenal growth of Dubai’s economy, tourism, and the commitment of the government to make a smooth transition to a knowledge-based and innovation-based economy necessitated more investment in building the necessary human capital to achieve these objectives.

The impact of the financial crisis on the training budget was felt in 2009 when the budget decreased to 122 million with an average

decline of 14% from the previous year. In 2010, the budget continued to decline by an extra 3%. In 2011, it went down to 100 million with an average decline of 18% from the previous year. Despite the continuous cuts to the training budget, the 2011 budget is still higher than that of 2007 as demonstrated in Figure 3. Also, the scholarships awarded to government employees to pursue higher education inside the country and abroad witnessed a steady rise from 2005 when its budget was 18 million to reach 65 million in 2010. The budget for scholarships did not decline until 2011 when it went down to 50 million.

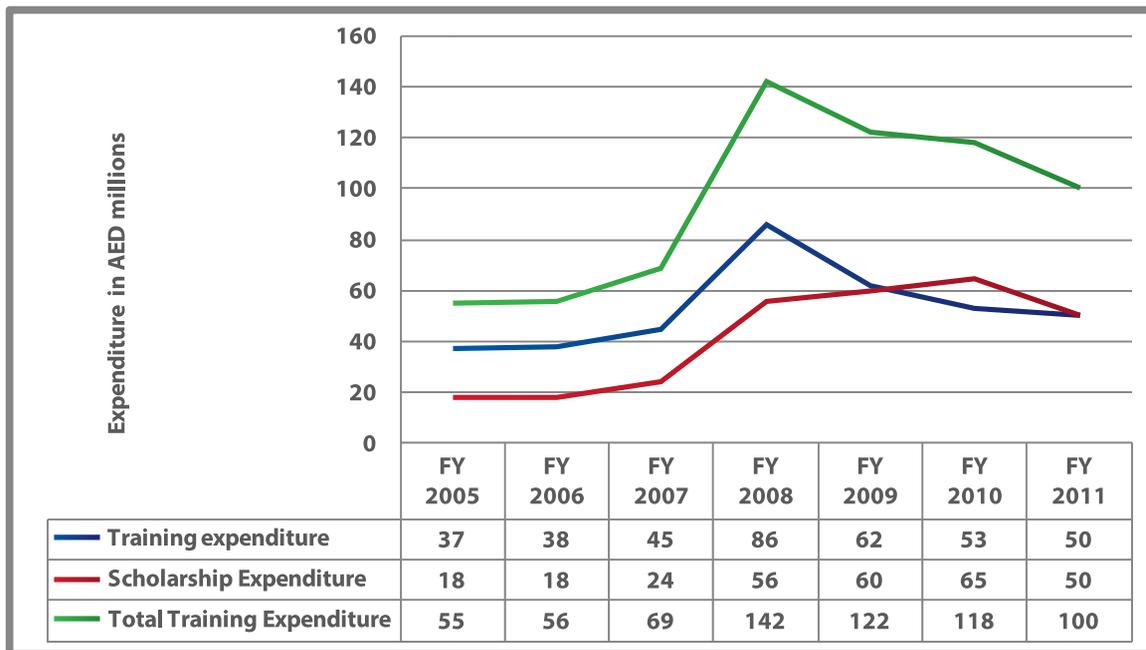
The decline in the training budget that Dubai’s Department of Finance allocated to its various entities had a direct influence on the way they managed their training practices and budgets. Figure 4 gives a clear illustration of the budgetary and training strategies impacting Dubai government entities covered by this study.

The survey data reveals interesting findings about the way in which the budget limitations affected the training practices of major government entities in Dubai. A total of 79.5% of respondents agreed that their budgets were reduced, and a total of 61.2% indicated that

this cut in the budget had a negative impact on their learning from international best practices. In addition, 61.2% agreed that their training strategies were also affected by budgetary limitations. Learning from international best practices had been carried out by attending international training programs, benchmarking

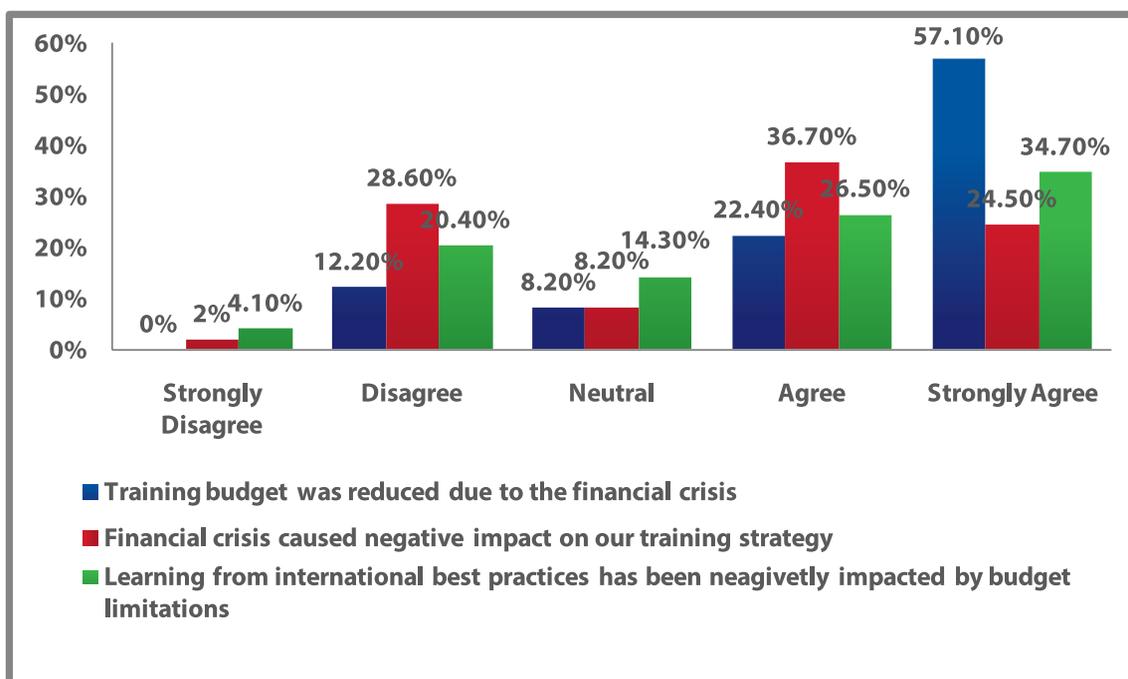
Dubai’s practices with those of other governments in the U.S. and Europe along with hiring international consultants to implement advanced training frameworks and programs in Dubai.

Figure 3: Government of Dubai’s overall training and scholarships’ expenditures for public sector employees



Source: Dubai’s Department of Finance (2012)

Figure 4: The impact of the financial crisis on Human Resources/training departments in Dubai’s government



The budgetary limitations from 2009 have had a negative impact on the practices of Human Resources and training departments in Dubai. 57% of respondents indicated that their future training programs were reduced due to their limited financial resources, and 47% indicated that fewer people than before participated in formal training programs. This explains the decline in the number of training programs organized every year as shown by the numbers in Figure 5.

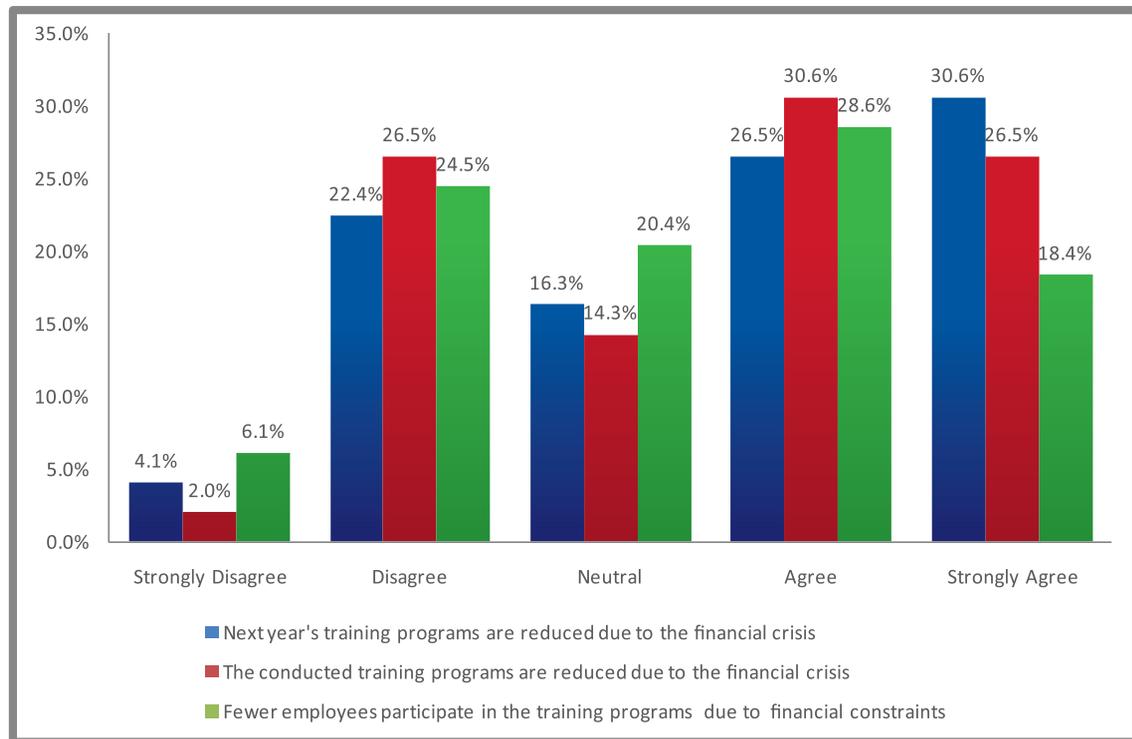
Some government entities managed to maximize the number of employees who received formal training, as 30.6% of respondents

disagreed that the crisis had any negative impact on the number of employees who benefited from training.

### Negative and positive impacts of the crisis on training practices

The in-depth interviews conducted with 19 Human Resources and training directors representing 17 government entities in Dubai revealed crucial insights regarding both the negative and, more importantly, the positive impacts of the budget restrictions on the training departments. These results allow government departments to learn from the negative consequences of the financial constraints and

Figure 5: The impact of the financial crisis on training practices in Dubai's government



minimize their effects in the future. Learning from the positive effects of the crisis is equally important to further improve the efficiency and effectiveness of these departments and build on their strengths.

The largest negative impact of the financial crisis was the significant cut in training budgets that decreased by 40% to 60% in some entities. All the respondents pointed out that they struggled to secure equitable, affordable and, at the same time, high quality training programs.

As Table 1 demonstrates, and as confirmed by the survey data, the number of training programs and hours showed a continuous decline in the previous three years, and overseas trips to learn from international best practices of Western governments witnessed similar fate. Attending international conferences and workshops as part of strengthening employees' managerial and social skills were suspended in the majority of the surveyed entities. Additionally, some government entities had to reduce the number of staff in their training departments and substitute them with

Table 1: The impact of the financial crisis on training practices in the government of Dubai

Negative impact	Positive impact	Training activities/areas impacted by the crisis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced the overall training budget for all government entities in Dubai with varying degrees (50% to 60% reduction in the annual training budget).</li> <li>Significant reduction in the number of training programs, sessions and hours per employee.</li> <li>Overseas training programs and participating/attending international conferences were significantly reduced.</li> <li>Internal training was not possible for some organizations that did not have employees with the necessary skills to train their colleagues.</li> <li>Some government entities either closed or reduced staff significantly.</li> <li>Some interviewees indicated that the quality of training could be impacted negatively if proper measures were not taken to secure high quality and low cost training programs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Careful identification of training needs and prioritizing targeted skills.</li> <li>Cutting the costs of traveling abroad to get training, and more reliance on local and regional training institutions.</li> <li>Some Human Resources departments reconsidered their organizations' training strategy and introduced new policies for knowledge-sharing and transfers.</li> <li>New and innovative ways to provide cost-effective training programs.</li> <li>Shift from reliance on external training sources to internal ones: utilization of organizational capacity, teaching employees self-development strategies.</li> <li>Focus on establishing local training organizations and building home-grown expertise.</li> <li>The most qualified staff provided training to their colleagues at their organizations.</li> <li>Reliance on web-based training sessions.</li> <li>Many government entities signed MoUs to share their expertise and training programs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Functional and technical training programs were reduced.</li> <li>Leadership training programs decreased significantly.</li> <li>Fewer soft-skills training programs.</li> <li>General awareness and social training programs also reduced.</li> <li>Benchmarking local training programs with international ones was not affordable to all entities.</li> <li>Fewer guest lecturers from abroad and fewer seminars/conferences.</li> </ul>

Source: Analysis of interviews conducted with Human Resources/training managers in Dubai's government

temporary external trainers who were hired on a temporary and hourly basis. In a few cases, the overall quality of the offered programs did not meet the same standards of quality as before. This was mostly the case for the government entities that lacked skilled employees who could offer training to their colleagues and for those who could not hire external trainers to offer the training. Some instrumental training programs were either suspended, like those of leadership, or had their numbers reduced, as was the case with functional and technical programs.

Despite the negative impact of the crisis on the overall training budget and the number of programs and hours of training delivered

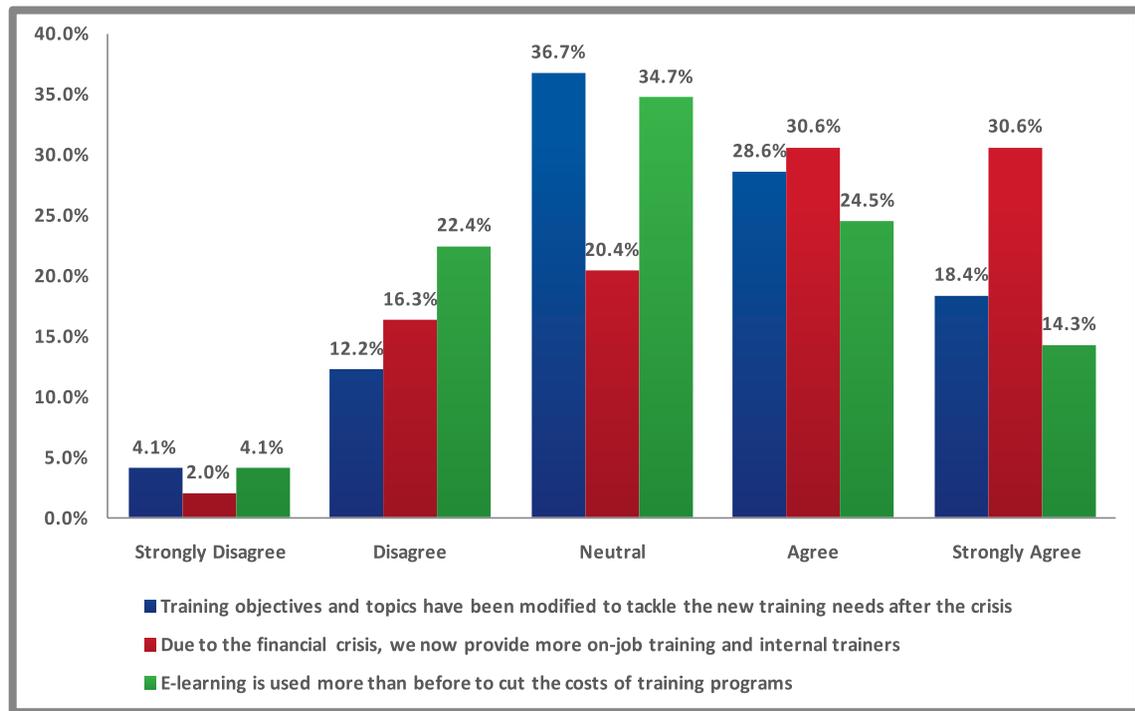
per year, the crisis actually resulted in many positive and long-term effects. Almost all the interviewed training directors indicated that the tight and dwindling training budgets forced them to rethink and prioritize their training needs, and led them to eliminate unnecessary training programs. They kept only the vital and crucial ones to sustain the effectiveness and efficiency of their employees. More importantly, costly trips to conduct training programs abroad have been strictly limited allowing local institutions to be approached to offer training to government employees, thereby reducing expenses and encouraging

home-grown expertise. The other positive result from the tight budget is the identification of qualified senior and skilled employees within organizations and converting them into internal trainers. Instead of hiring external experts and consultants, employees designed and created training materials and delivered them to their colleagues without incurring extra costs on

the organization. 62% of survey respondents (Figure 6) indicated that they adopted more on-the-job training programs instead of formal ones to institutionalize an environment of ongoing learning and a culture of knowledge-sharing.

The organizations that lacked the institutional capacity to deliver internal training programs relied more heavily on web-based training

Figure 6: Dubai Government entities' response to the budget cuts



courses. As shown in Figure 6, 38.8% of respondents indicated that they found e-learning less costly and easier to arrange and deliver to a larger audience of employees in different locations at the same time. Other innovative ways to deliver training materials were initiated by training departments who highly encouraged their employees to develop self-learning abilities by attending focus group sessions and professional seminars to enhance their knowledge and practical skills.

To further demonstrate the actions taken by most government entities to curtail the influence of the budget cuts on their training departments, Figure 6 shows some measures taken by the various departments in Dubai. Only 47% of the respondents indicated that they changed

their training objectives and topics to reflect the changing needs during the time of financial crisis. Although the forms of delivery changed substantially as less reliance was on formal classroom training, half of the respondents did not reform their training needs to be in alignment with new challenges and market needs.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explores the impact of the financial crisis on the training budget and practices of major government entities in Dubai. The findings of the study indicate that Dubai is very aware of the importance of offering continuous training opportunities to government employees in order to enhance the effectiveness of service delivery to employees and organizations. Dubai's

Human Resources Law stipulates that all public employees regardless of their rank or role in their organizations must attend sponsored training programs. As indicated in this policy brief, the majority of public sector employees attend at least 5 days of training per year which is a similar case in OECD countries.

When the financial crisis struck in late 2008, the training budget the central government of Dubai allocated to its departments witnessed a gradual decline. However, as is the case with the U.S. and the U.K., Dubai managed to properly and effectively cope with the dwindling training budget and continued to offer training programs in different and low-cost formats while preserving the expectation of high quality results.

To further enhance the quality of training programs and effectively operate the training departments under restricted budgets, here are recommendations for the Dubai government to consider:

1. Government entities in Dubai should create institutionalized channels of communication and cooperation to provide each other with training programs in their areas of expertise. This will significantly cut costs of hiring external firms to provide the training and, more importantly, will strengthen the ties among all government entities to exchange knowledge and expertise.
2. As indicated in this study, the crisis was actually an opportunity to enhance the effectiveness of the training programs while diminishing unnecessary costs. However, Dubai's central government should create a knowledge portal which centralizes training best practices and lessons learned from the time of the crisis. Moreover, it should include names of the newly identified trainers, their fields and organizational affiliations to allow more institutionalized and functional ways to locate them when needed.
3. Human Resources and training directors in all government entities in Dubai should gather in the form of seminars or workshops to exchange the various innovative ways in which they have successfully or unsuccessfully dealt with the repercussions of the financial crisis in their departments. Lessons learned and best practices should be documented, published and circulated among all entities to share knowledge.
4. The study has found that more than half of the government entities in Dubai did not reform their training objectives and topics to be aligned with the new financial environment created by the crisis. This should be one of the priorities that the training and Human Resources directors should take into consideration while revising their training strategies.
5. Dubai's central government should nominate one of the Emirate's training centers as a certified government training body. This will encourage all government entities to conduct their training programs at this institution and help establish homegrown expertise in providing quality training programs. Additionally, this will substantially reduce the costs of traveling abroad to attend training or inviting international consultants and trainers on a contractual basis.

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