

# AN OVERVIEW OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE OF EXPATRIATES

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Received: 17. 11. 2014  
Accepted: 1. 10. 2015

Review  
UDC 331.5(100)

*In the era of rapid globalization, every kind of business and commercial trading calls for a massive exchange of ideas, products, personnel, infrastructure, and development resources across the world. Today's highly competitive global business environment sets the platform for international employee assignments, wherein people possessing the required knowledge base and motivation, move across international boundaries. The purpose of the study is to identify various factors that might influence the expatriates during their foreign assignments. The study gains significance by attempting to understand the cultural challenges and intangible barriers that might exist in a new cultural setting and which might impede the performance of expatriates. The analysis is based on the review of approximately fifty existing papers. The study finally highlights the key factors that make the expatriates perform better in their new working environment.*

**Keywords:** multinational companies; expatriate performance; host country nationals; cross cultural training.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With global economy largely dependent on multinational corporations,, there is definitely a need to analyze, understand and improve the factors underpinning the performance and effectiveness of expatriates engaged in international assignments. Since reaching out to global markets becomes an

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inevitable and integral part of any MNCs' vision and mission, a huge investment is being made in the models that facilitate such international partnerships, fusions, mergers, acquisitions and franchises. The purpose of the study stems from a critical need for a research contribution that will analyse the factors impacting the expatriates' performance. Research conducted on this subject primarily focus on single or very few impacting factors. Hence, this article aims to fill a gap in this area of research by providing a holistic view of the impacting factors which are predominantly categorized as individual, organizational and social/environmental.

This article deals with several factors that contribute to the effective performance of the expatriates by discussing some of the fundamental aspects discussed in the literature. Therefore, the specific objective of the study is to identify various factors that influence the performance of expatriates. The study heavily relies on the research findings pertaining to organizational dynamics, expatriates' career, workplace diversity, evolving changes in the social capital model etc. Selected references include contributions published in the last three decades (1984-2014), identified from the ProQuest referencing database.

## **2. FACTORS INFLUENCING EXPATRIATE PERFORMANCE**

Considering relatively high expectations set on expatriates going on international assignments, there are several factors that directly or indirectly influence their performance and productivity. Earlier authors have categorized the factors into various groupings namely, physiological responses, cultural shock, ethnicity, cross-cultural communication (Sappinen, 1993; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Tung, 1998; Bandura, 2002). Since the dynamics and diversity of the work place where the expatriate is positioned could be quite varied, an expatriate is invariably facing numerous challenges and issues that are often unexpected by the individual concerned. These challenges could be broadly classified into three categories: individual, organizational & social factors. A theoretical model of the multidimensional factors influencing expatriate performance is shown in Figure 1.

### **2.1. Individual factors**

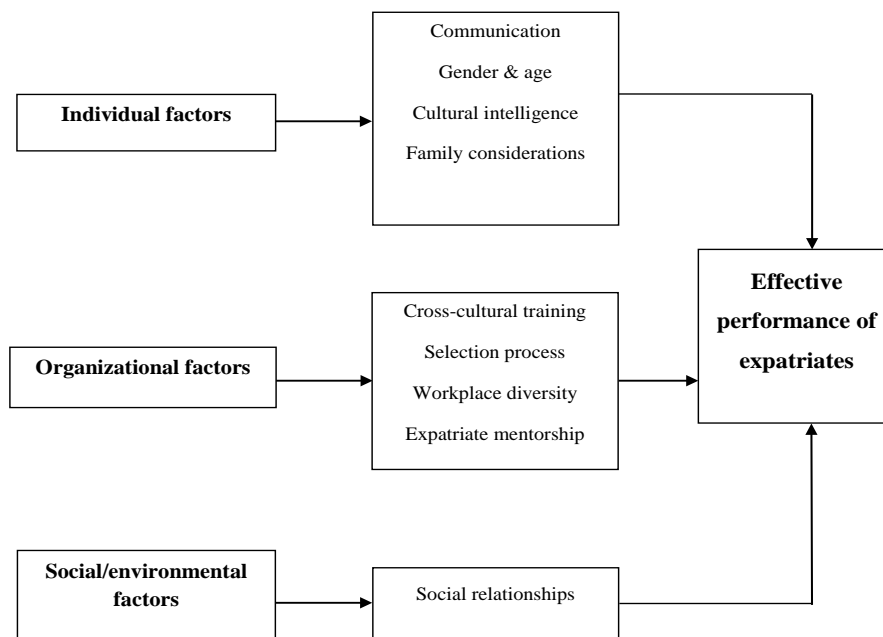
This is a broad classification of personal attributes and behaviors acquired by the expatriate through one's nationality, origin, climatic conditions, living conditions etc. Such individual factors play a significant role in adapting to the new workplace, as the expatriates are expected to work with host country nationals whose values, habits and lifestyle practices vastly differ from their

own. This single group of factors is both influential and even highly predominant in most cases, when attempting to assess the suitability of the expatriates for a certain position.

### 2.1.1. Communication

The most predominant factor that highly influences the success of an expatriate are his/her linguistic skills in host national language. There are many interpretations on what communication is. On a very basic level it can be described as “*the simultaneous encoding, decoding and interpretation of verbal and nonverbal messages between people*” (Neupliep, 2009). Lack of required skills in a host language can present a challenges for expatriates. Expatriates are considered able to cope with work challenges by simply developing appropriate language skills thereby building strong relationships with host country nationals (Manev & Stevenson, 2001). When the expatriate possess a required level of command in the host country language or shows a strong willingness to learn the language, this directly enables his/her adjustments within a workplace (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985).

Figure 1. Theoretical model of factors influencing expatriate performance



Since a large part of the culture is encapsulated within the language, expatriate should strive to eliminate barriers in this respect which paves way for long lasting professional networks. In addition, expatriates might be subjected to various situations wherein their interactions are not stipulated to a particular group of stakeholders but to a wide range of them. In such scenarios, ability to maintain social exchanges and understand a host country's language facilitates socialising and enables expatriates to avoid possible time delays (Lau et al., 2001).

### *2.1.2. Gender and age*

There is no scientific evidence that age factor poses any sort of limitation in the performance and productivity of expatriates. While this is a welcoming fact, it is also important to note, nevertheless, that gender plays a key role in the acceptance of expatriate among host country nationals. In general, any research is positioned on the finding that female expatriates show a greater tendency to adapt to cultural differences and to show willingness to familiarize themselves with the new environment, language and trends than male expatriates. This trait in female expatriates is a point of advantage in their favour as well as a motivation to perform better and effectively succeed in the assignments.

In addition, research also shows a surprising trend that the number of female expatriates is significantly low (Tung, 1998; Vance, Paik & Semos, 1999). There is an interesting myth (Adler, 1984) proposed which states that the prejudices shown on women in foreign countries has a huge influence on their effectiveness. Studies exploring this myth have shown contrary results, in that, irrespective of the host countries, female expatriates faced less prejudices and challenges of acceptance when compared to their male expatriates. Categorization of female expatriates as "out of the group" members is also shown to be less than that of male expatriates. Thus, personal factors like age, origin and gender have been studied to understand their implications on expatriate performance and all these factors play a great role in categorizing the expatriate as an 'in' or 'out' group member among HCNs (Varma & Stroh, 2001)

### *2.1.3. Cultural intelligence*

Cross-cultural adjustment (Hechanova, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2003; Huang et al., 2005) is an important criterion to measure the effectiveness of expatriates in host country. The concept of cultural intelligence has a solid influence on the capacity of an expatriate to successfully adapt to the new and

unfamiliar environment and on his/her ability to function seamlessly in such diverse cultural settings (Earley & Ang, 2003; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004). Major studies (Ang et al., 2004 and 2007) have revealed that there is a directly proportional relationship with an expatriate's cultural intelligence and his job performance. Since the job expectations demand behaviors and understanding of cultures different from theirs, effectiveness of expatriates also relies on the fact that by possessing a high degree of awareness and sensitivity to local culture, an expatriate performs better in his/her international assignments. Having established that cultural intelligence plays a key role, there are few important dimensions of it which are to be studied.

- Expatriates with high cognitive cultural intelligence are able to easily understand the similarities and dissimilarities between cultures (Brislin et al., 2006)
- Expatriates with high meta-cognitive cultural intelligence are sensible enough to rise to the occasion and derive help from their cultural knowledge (Earley & Ang, 2003; Earley et al., 2006)
- Expatriates with high motivational cultural intelligence are self-motivated and show a distinct characteristics of persevering in the face of resistance and uncertainly in order to complete their assignments (Bandura, 2002 )
- Expatriates with high behavioral cultural intelligence possess flexibility in modifying their behaviors required for the cultural context (Ang et al., 2007). This enables them to learn a wide range of cultural behaviors and adapt to specific needs of the situation.

In a nutshell, expatriates who score high in any given dimension of cultural intelligence are successful in their international assignments.

#### *2.1.4. Family considerations*

International assignments, in many cases, require a permanent or interim relocation of families. This results in additional responsibility on the part of the expatriates in catering for the family requirements like education, housing etc. Moreover, since the entire family is involved, the process of learning the new culture has ambivalent results, sometimes easier due to multiple participants and, sometimes, more difficult, due to the amount of family commitments. However, expatriates may be forced to live away from families due to various constraints. This can lead to considerable mental suffering and have a negative impact on their performance. Challenges faced by working couples may also impact negatively an expatriate's professional performance. In multiple cases, expatriate assignments impact spouse's career as well (Richardson, 2006). It is

interesting to note that, in cases where expatriates fail in their assignments, the failure is attributed to several factors, concerning one's family conditions (Tung, 1982).

## **2.2. Organizational factors**

Multinational companies (MNCs), multinational enterprises (MNEs) and other organizations play a contributing role in the successful performance of expatriates in a host country. Such organizations can largely facilitate the expatriates to mould them to suit the requirements of the cross-cultural environments. Training is a key area (Ko & Yang, 2011; Tung, 1982; Bennett, 2000) wherein organizations can liberally contribute in order to equip the expatriates to face the challenges within a diverse work environment.

### *2.2.1. Cross cultural training*

Cross-cultural training is an important contribution from the organizational point of view. Its purpose is to enable the expatriates to position themselves well in a host environment and operate at high performance levels. As some authors point out, there is a strong connection between the success of expatriate's assignments and effective cross-cultural training (Ko & Yang, 2011). Such training includes various elements (Tung, 1982) such as descriptive sessions on environment briefings, cultural orientation to make the expatriates get familiarized about culture and value systems of a host country, language skills development, development of social skills etc., In addition to these, cross-cultural training might also include field trips for real-time exposure, pre-departure training etc.

### *2.2.2. Selection process*

The selection process implies that HR managers will investigate and find suitable candidates that are able to fulfill the mission of an expatriate (Caligiuri, 2000). In most cases, expatriate selection process relies on the measure of technical skills and knowledge that one possesses, in order to execute the international assignments. Nevertheless, there are other significant subtleties which can be attributed to the individual's characteristics, such as openness towards new cultures, interpersonal skills, initiative to socialize, ability to adapt to the differences in work place practices, tolerance, empathy and positive approach in handling tough or unfamiliar situations.

Hence, the following points need to be considered by the organization as a part of its expatriate selection process:

- whether an individual has right amount of motivation and attitude to accept and face the challenges of international assignments;
- whether an individual would be able to tolerate cultural differences and show willingness to adapt;
- whether an individual requires additional language training to be able to learn about the new environment and, thus, increase his/her effectiveness in a new assignment;.
- whether an individual's family situation is well balanced and in control.

### 2.2.3. *Workplace diversity*

In any workplace today innumerable dimensions of diversity can be found. Those include the issues of ethnicity, rules of the spoken language, gestures of recognition of good work, recreational habits, seniority, business meeting etiquette, functional procedures etc., (Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2003)<sup>1</sup>. While the new environment generally presents enough challenges to any newcomer, it is particularly difficult for an expatriate to cope with the organizational culture. In such circumstances, individual skills and behaviours, managerial practices and organizational policies all play a vital role in balancing diversity.

### 2.2.4. *Expatriate mentorship*

Many international enterprises and corporations consider expatriates to be on the "fast track" of their career advancement and they are expected to deliver their best performance. This expectation, nevertheless, does not take into account the professional challenges that come their way while they execute their assignments. In short, expatriates are generally sent on assignments without prior training or mentoring required to adequately equip them for cultural and language barriers (Borstoff et al., 1997; Thomas & Inkson, 2003). Therefore, more and more research is done with the aim of understanding the role of expatriate mentors in formal training processes. Since a skills set necessary for successfully mentoring expatriates develops over years and following multiple exposures to variety of international assignments, number of coaches involved in the process is relatively low. This is an important point to be brought to notice of the organizations sponsoring international assignments. One of their

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<sup>1</sup> Internal and external dimensions in this study are adapted from Loden & Rosener (1991).

tasks should be developing practitioners who can efficiently train internationally-based professionals. Therefore, expatriates could look forward to a support from such mentors in understanding cultural, legal and economic differences of a host country which would, in turn, enable a more effective performance. Such mentors can provide not only cultural support but also psychological support for expatriates in order to encourage positive behaviour necessary for good work performance.

### 2.3. Social (environmental) factors

Apart from individual and organizational factors, social and environmental factors also gain importance in impacting the performance of expatriates (Bender, 1944; Richardson, 2000; Selmer, 1999, 2002; Selmer et al., 2000). Under the influence of these factors, expatriates generally have less control over the new situation and they are often unable to cope successfully with certain social challenges. In general, people with whom expatriates interact, contribute largely to social and environmental factors.

#### 2.3.1. Social relationship

Performance and effectiveness of expatriates have a direct relationship with the social networking with their host country nationals - HCNs (Earley & Gibson, 2002; Kraimer et al., 2001; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Varma & Stroh, 2001). Underpinning various studies conducted in this direction, several theoretical models were proposed to generalize the social elements that has a large emphasis on expatriate success. As per social capital model (Adler and Kwon's, 2002), there are several nuances that surprisingly have substantial impact on the expatriates' performance. This model provides a deep insight into the psychological factors involved in the interactions between the expatriates and their fellow host country nationals.

Some of the findings of the social capital model indicate that the amount of access to resources and information (opportunities) empowers expatriates. These opportunities have the following dimensions:

- *network density* indicating the number of HCNs involved in the interaction;
- *depth of relationship* indicating the closeness/strength with each HCN in such interactions;
- *instrumental support* received from HCNs in terms of advice, suggestion, guidance, mentorship etc.;
- *contact quality* referring to the nature of the relationship like friendly, professional, tough, cooperative, etc.



Another interesting finding of social capital model indicates that motivation is yet another influencing determinant. Motivation includes elements like:

- *Trust* which involves the goodwill shared between expatriates and their HCNs. In relationships where trust is high, social exchange is relatively higher and easier (Fukuyama, 1995; Gambetta, 1988; Putnam, 1993; 1995; Ring and Van de Ven, 1992; 1994; Tyler & Kramer, 1996). Although trust is not widely discussed in literature, it is certainly a significant factor lying at the roots of international assignments. When a social system has high level of trust, it is easier to fulfill commitments and expectations resulting out of high performance and collaboration. Hence expatriates should utilize each opportunity to strengthen the trust built with HCNs.
- *Norm of reciprocity* (Gouldner, 1960) involves the principle of helping and not injuring those who have helped them. Though it sounds highly psychological, it is a powerful indicator if the relationships with peers, subordinates and superiors are genuine. If there is a positive norm of reciprocity, expatriates find it relatively easy, or less challenging, to obtain/provide knowledge transfer, make adjustments in working methodologies, show willingness to align to the general practices followed in the host country workplace.

The third interesting determinant of the social capital details out the competencies and resourcefulness of the HCNs with whom expatriates interact heavily. Though this determinant is mostly relying on the HCNs rather than on expatriates themselves, still expatriates can seek opportunities to strengthen and positively influence this determinant factor by practicing other two facets like opportunities and motivation as discussed earlier. Looking further, it becomes evident that following elements come into play.

- *Interpersonal skills* of HCNs to open up a conversation with a new expatriate and hold meaningful discussions;
- *Personal traits* of HCNs like flexibility, respect, tolerance which are compelling qualities required in interactions with foreign people. Prejudices owned by HCNs also carry considerable amount of implications on the expatriate effectiveness;
- *Cultural empathy* refers to understanding the values, working styles and practices followed in an expatriate's organization (Cui & Awa, 1992) which includes treating the expatriates in similar manner as they treat fellow employees and expecting such behavior from them in return;
- *Work ability* of HCNs which directly impacts the effectiveness of the associated expatriates.

As mentioned above, social interactions between expatriates and HCNs play a critical role psychologically, in facilitating expatriate performance and effectiveness. It is also evident that the reliability and accountability lies on both the actors - expatriates and associated HCNs for successful partnership and therefore successful completion of assignments.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Cultural intelligence is the most influential factor due to the nature and diversity of a host country. It is emphasized that most of the issues faced by expatriates, particularly those influencing their performance, stem from a variety of cultural differences experienced by the expatriates both within and beyond the context of their work. Cultural intelligence is a holistic factor involving not only the expatriate but also their families. The degree of impact is relatively high if they are co-located. In order to experience a fruitful preparation period, expatriates' family situations and circumstances should be thoroughly addressed.

Fish and Woods (1994) proposed a short recreational trip for an expatriate's family in order to get acquainted with the host country's culture and gain a sense of the environmental aspects that they would experience during the actual expatriation. Since preparation of all the individuals involved requires a dedicated training procedure, cross-cultural training undertaken by the expatriates play a key role in their performance levels. This should particularly include informal gatherings of new expatriates and their families along with fellow expatriates and their families which would provide an invaluable opportunity for sharing experiences and information well as for addressing their needs and imparting a feeling of belonging in a foreign environment (Dowling et al., 1994). Thus, this study establishes this cultural aspect as the single most predominant factor in expatriates' cultural training, as its degree of impact is stronger than all other discussed factors.

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#### **PREGLED MULTI-DIMENZIONALNIH UTJECAJNIH ČIMBENIKA NA EFEKTIVNOST PERFORMANSI ISELJENIH ZAPOSLENIKA**

##### **Sažetak**

U doba brze globalizacije, sve vrste poslovanja traže značajnu razmjenu ideja, proizvoda, zaposlenika, elemenata infrastrukture i razvojnih resursa širom svijeta. Današnje, izrazito konkurentno globalno poslovno okruženje, stvara temelj za međunarodni angažman zaposlenika, pri čemu se ljudi s odgovarajućim znanjem i motivacijom kreću preko međunarodnih granica. Cilj je ovog rada utvrditi različite čimbenike, koji bi mogli utjecati na iseljene zaposlenike tijekom njihovih međunarodnih zadaća. U radu se pokušavaju razumjeti kulturni izazovi i neopipljive barijere, koji se javljaju u novom kulturnom okruženju, a mogli bi djelovati na performanse iseljenih zaposlenika. U analizi se koriste prethodna saznanja, izložena u približno pedeset postojećih studija radova, nakon čega se izdvajaju ključni čimbenici, koji poboljšavaju performanse iseljenih zaposlenika u novoj radnoj sredini.

