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Screening and selecting project managers for the Middle East

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Abstract:
Cross-cultural training is of prime importance if the expatriates are to adjust speedily to the new environment and do well in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Selecting the right people for the overseas job is important as the selected individuals need to have a desire and readiness to learn. Some researchers in this field referred to this as the "learning orientation" where people with high learning orientations like challenges and are ready to learn and people with low learning orientations like to play it safe and do not like challenges. The way the "right" people can be chosen for the overseas assignment is by pre-testing the employees. It is important that they are able to adapt to new and unfamiliar situations, many researchers believe that this characteristic is very important to success.
The mistake a lot of companies make is that they select staff that have been successful in the home country without testing them. These companies fail to realise that these employees need additional qualities such as being able to adjust quickly to new and unfamiliar environments and have the desire to learn about new cultures as well as being willing to change. Using six case studies this paper will analyse the importance of selecting the right people. All six case studies are Australian international companies operating worldwide including the UAE.

Keywords
cross-cultural training, learning orientation, selection criteria

1 Introduction

There are a vast number of reasons why cross-cultural training is important. From a company perspective, if their personnel are adequately trained for the overseas assignment they will be more successful by increasing the overall efficiency and profitability, and the company will avoid losing money (Cerimagic, 2010). In addition, the company can overcome the belief that their way of doing things is superior to that of others (Ono, 1992).

Cross-cultural training helps personnel to improve and to be able to interact effectively with local people and co-workers (Shenkar, 1995). Many researchers argue that companies have failed to pay attention to "screening, selection and training of potential expatriate staff and the non-technical skills they should possess." (Forster, 2000:63).

The mistake a lot of companies make is that they select staff that have been successful in the home country without testing them. These companies fail to realise that these employees need additional qualities such as being able to adjust quickly to new and unfamiliar environments and have the desire to learn about new cultures as well as being willing to change (Porter and Tansky, 1999).

Another major error that the companies make is the lack of cross-cultural training that they provide for the employees.

The way the "right" people can be chosen for the overseas assignment is by pre-testing the employees. It is important that they are able to adapt to new and unfamiliar situations. Porter et al., (1996) believe that this characteristic is very important to success.

2   Selection Criteria for International Assignments

In the recent years international human resource management specialists such as Black and Gregersen (1991), as well as Bonache et al. (2001) have developed a model that helps underpin the effective selection of personnel for overseas assignments. This model helps to make the selection criteria more effective.
This model identifies two types of adjustment:
- the anticipatory adjustment, and
- the in-country adjustment.

Firstly, the anticipatory adjustment is carried out before the expatriate leaves the home country and it is influenced by a number of important factors such as pre-departure cross-cultural training, which is designed to familiarize expatriates with the culture and work life of the host country.
Secondly, the in-country adjustment has five factors that influence it; to begin with the expatriate's ability to stay positive, to deal well with stressful and high-pressure situations and to interact with the host nationals to better understand the host culture and values.
Thirdly, the expatriate should be clear about the job.
The fourth factor is the organizational culture, and how well the expatriate can adjust to it.
Fifth, is a no-work factor, and it is looking at how the expatriate faces the new cultural experience and how well the expatriate and his/her family/partner can adjust to the host country. The final factor identified in the in-country adjustment mode is for the expatriate to socialize and quickly find out who is who in the host organization.
After analyzing the relationships between host nationals and expatriate, Caligiuri (2000) reported that greater interaction with host nationals positively relates to cross-cultural adjustment when the expatriate possesses the personality trait of openness. Caligiuri (2000) also states that the personality trait of sociability was also positively related to cross-cultural adjustment.
According to Luthans and Doh (2009) anticipatory and in-country adjustment will have an influence on the expatriate's mode and degree of adjustment. All expatriates go through a transition period after they arrive in a foreign country. There are ups and downs, but with appropriate cross-cultural training and support the expatriates can quicker adjust to the foreign country and integrate much faster too.
McCormick and Chapman (1996) consider that anticipatory and in-country adjustment will have an influence on the expatriate's mode and degree of adjustment. Figure 1 shows the transition which expatriates go through after they arrive in a foreign country. There are ups and downs, but with appropriate cross-cultural training and support the expatriates can quicker adjust to the foreign country and integrate much faster too.
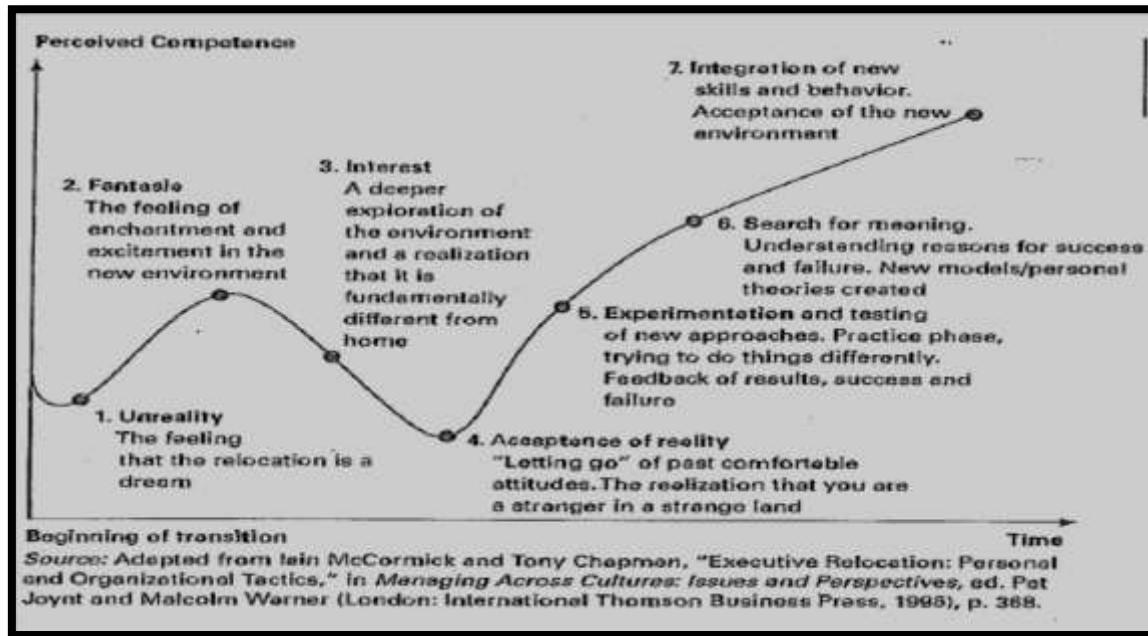
Figure 1: Transitions which expatriates experience
(Source: Luthans and Doh (2009:483)

Companies also need to consider both technical and human criteria when selecting expatriates. Expatriates that are sent overseas must be able to adapt to change.

Criteria that are important to be considered when selecting expatriates, are primarily their age, experience and education. Technical competence is important, but it is only one of a number of skills that an expatriate will need in a host country. If the company only selects an expatriate based on his/her technical skills the company may be setting the expatriate up to fail, because the expatriate will go overseas believing that he/she is project ready and they may not be able to deal with the challenges awaiting them. The chance of failure is likely to increase. In addition, companies usually want the personnel to have an academic degree as well as the desire to work abroad. Over the years companies have realized that balance is important and this is why they send both younger as well as older personnel overseas.

The literature suggests that cross-cultural training has long been advocated as a means of facilitating effective cross-cultural transfer of expatriates. While international organisations understand and acknowledge that cross-cultural training is important, in many cases they still do not offer any cross-cultural training to their employees. There are many reasons why companies to not offer cross-cultural training. Some believe that it is too costly and time consuming, or that training is not necessary, or effective. In some cases it was reported that the project management industry is so fast paced that there is simply no time for cross-cultural training.

2.1   Learning

Once again selecting the right people for the job is important as the selected individuals need to have a desire and readiness to learn. Porter et al., (1996) and VandeWalle (1997) referred to this as the "learning orientation" where people with high learning orientations like challenges and are ready to learn and people with low learning orientations like to play it safe and do not like the same challenges. Those researchers argue that employees with high learning orientations are better candidates for overseas assignments as they want to learn and the training provided to them will have a high impact on them. Since no matter how good a training program is, if the participants are not willing to learn new skills and aptitudes the training is useless.

The way the "right" people can be chosen for the overseas assignment is by pre-testing the employees. It is important that they are able to adapt to new and unfamiliar situations, Porter et al. (1996) believes that this characteristic is very important to success.

Luthans (2004) wrote that another important area of consideration for developing good expatriates was the different learning styles of individuals. Learning is the acquisition of skills, knowledge and abilities that result in a relatively permanent change in behaviour (Luthans, 2004). Researchers such as vanReine and Trompenaard (2000) have discovered that different national cultures prefer different learning styles to match the environment and the company needs to deliver the training in the most effective manner. They have noted that Americans, for example, prefer an experimental approach while Germans prefer a theoretical-analytical learning style. It should be also noted that no matter how good the training was the new learned behaviours would not be used if they were not reinforced.

It should be noted that over the years better paradigms for social learning theory and cultural theory have emerged. This increases the impact and the likely success of cross-cultural training (Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Kim, 1993; Bhawuk, 1998).

Pruegger and Rogers (1994) suggested that interpersonal methods are more effective than didactic training programs. Waxin, et al. (2002) found that globally the most effective type of learning about a culture is by experimental training. However, Waxin, et al. (2005:69) also points out that the method of training should be specifically tailored "to the cultural distance between the expatriate's country of origin and the host country". In addition, Vance and Paik (2002) point out that for cross-cultural training to be effective it should be consistent with the cultural characteristics of the host country. Companies would also benefit from using their former expatriates as trainers, as those former expatriates have been there and can put themselves in the shoes of the new expatriates (Cerimagic, 2010).

3   Methodology

The case study approach has been chosen to conduct this research. Case studies have been used in many studies as a research method in many situations including such environments as sociology and business, and looking at individuals and groups (Yin, 2009). Interviews have been used to better understand the complex social phenomena such as culture and its dimensions, for example. Each of the six case studies consisted of two in-depth interviews. This provided twelve interviews in total. Case studies allow researchers to "retain the holistic and meaningful characteristic of real-life events" (Yin, 2009:4) such as group behaviour, organisational and managerial processes. According to Grunbaum (2007) the case study approach has been used for several decades.

For the purposes of this research six companies were selected that had expatriate western project managers working for them (see Table 1). This research paper has been based on case studies because all the companies that have been lised in Table 1 (not named) have expatriate (western) project managers. The researcher had to control some of the environmental variations, while the focusing on large corporations allowed some variation and variety due to size differences (but not excessive ones) among the companies. According to the research carried out by Pettigrew (1988) the specifications focused on a particular population. In the case of this research it focused on expatriate western project managers and this reduced many extraneous variations and provided the potential to clarify the range (the field) of the findings.

Table 1: Summary Table of Cases

CASE	INDUSTRY
Case One	World's largest privately owned engineering and construction companies.
Case Two	Structural engineering
Case Three	Project management and construction company.
Case Four	A development company, working in the residential, commercial, retail, funds management and hotel industry segments.
Case Five	Global network of professional firms providing audit, tax and advisory services
Case Six	Consultancy and construction

The interview questions were semi-structured and interviews were in-depth. However, every interview focused on the following criteria:

- Challenges
- Recruitment and importance of selecting the right people
- Cross-cultural training

The interviews were all recorded, next they were transcribed and then analysed via cross-case analysis. The extent of the sample was expanded by asking each interviewee if there was anyone they knew, who was a project manager and could make a contribution to this research. The interviewer also interviewed those individuals too and expanded the sample by around 20%.

4   Results

4.1   Challenges

Most of the challenges were due to the lack of knowledge on how things are done in the UAE compared to Australia.   Those mental challenges could be avoided or minimised with appropriate training and preparation of expatriates. A social network and support group (or groups) would be very helpful as well. The extreme heat outside and the ice cold air-conditioned offices inside whilst it sounds trite, can also be a physically challenging and can be a source of irritation to even the most seasoned expatriate.

4.2   Selecting the "Right" People for the Job

Many researchers argue that companies have failed to pay attention to "screening, selection and training of potential expatriate staff and the non-technical skills they should poses." (Forster, 2000:63). This was a constant theme throughout the interviews and some interviewees confirmed this was the case with their colleagues.

Preparation of expatriate staff is important to help them be prepared for the unfamiliar environment, to have an rough idea of what to expect, as well as help them to avoid any major errors in business dealings and in the important social interactions. Even with adequate preparation expatriates will not be able to function at their fullest capacity as soon as they arrive in the UAE, as this is too soon in their assignment. This is why cross-cultural training needs to be an ongoing and reinforced process. Without it most expatriates will struggle in the new environment and may even return to their home country prematurely and feel bitter about their experiences.

As pointed out earlier, selecting the "right" people for the overseas job is important, as the selected individuals need to have a desire and readiness to learn. Porter et al., (1999) and VandeWalle (1997) referred to this as the *"learning orientation"* where people with high learning orientations like challenges and are ready to learn and people with low learning orientations like to play it safe. Hence, it can be argued employees with high learning orientations are better candidates for overseas assignments as they want to learn and the training provided to them will have a higher impact on

them. What this research revealed is that, no matter how good a training program is, if the participants are not willing to learn new skills and implement those skills cross-cultural training will not help as these are not the 'right' people in the first place.

4.3   Recruitment

The expatriates in those case studies had all been recruited in different ways. Most had a phone interview while still in their home country and did not visit the UAE.

Case study firm five whose company has been in the UAE for the last thirty years did an initial phone interview where they ran through most of the difficulties that will come with working in the UAE. They look for people who have the necessary skills-set that is required to do the job. In addition, people who are known by the company's staff or who have worked previously on projects with staff from the company tended to have priority and these people are sourced or contacted to discover their interest in working in the UAE, on these projects for this company.

Additionally, many forms look at the age of the person and maturity level of the people that they were interested in employing. All of their senior managers do a personality profile, specially carried out by a consulting company to make sure that the person is more likely to fit the job. This again is a basic and simple process that can save a great deal of frustration and possible failure later.

4.4   Cross-Cultural Training

It was obvious from the six case studies that cross-cultural training was of high importance to the firms and the respondents and that it should be provided by the companies. The findings also revealed that preparation of expatriates for the UAE climate was considered absolutely vital. Nevertheless, even though the companies recognised that expatriates require being cross-culturally trained, most of the case study forms in this research do not offer adequate cross-cultural training. This research revealed that most of the interviewees do not get any pre-departure training; additionally majority of the interviewees report that they did not receive any training on site either after they arrive in the UAE. There are many reasons why companies do not offer cross-cultural training. Some of the cases studies suggested that cross-cultural is seen as too expensive or simply not necessary, as there is a believe that "you learn by doing" or you 'sink or swim'.

Since proper and adequate preparation helps expatriates quickly feel part of the community, it is essential that such training and preparation is provided. However, preparation such as induction programs should be dynamic, up-to-date, relevant and interesting. The participants should feel that they are being well prepared and that the material being given to them is useful and very relevant. Neither the facilitators, nor the participants should feel that everyone is just going through the 'motions' or ticking a box. Senior managers should regularly check on the quality of these preparation workshops and encourage existing employees to attend to ensure their content is adequate and useful.

In the interview expatriates were asked what is important to learn about the UAE and the Emirates before starting to do business in the UAE. The respondents clearly noted that the culture was rated of high importance. Cultural awareness is the number one skill that is necessary in this environment and respecting the culture goes hand-in-hand with it. For example, expatriates need to learn everything about the country, its people, religion, customs, rules and regulations. Keeping updated with the rules and regulations is very important as they change very quickly.

Additionally, throughout this research it was found that personal relationships and trust are important. Hence, a lot of time and effort needs to be put in to establish that trust and confidence. Networking in the UAE is a must, and expatriates must maintain their integrity and reputation. A bad reputation will result in reduced work or no work at all, therefore learning by doing is not the best way to go about acquiring new and necessary skills. Being aware of the fixed and changing environment in these countries is essential and importing personal views, attitudes and prejudices can cause problems in these relationships. Assuming that the local person has the same views and attitudes as the expatriate about certain issues can cause embarrassing problems for the individual and the company. The expatriate has to be sensitive to this or her environment at all times.

4.5   Testing the Post Training Experience

The interview revealed that most participants agree that testing for post-training experience would be beneficial. This was a strongly held view by most of the interviewed staff.

The testing of the post-training experience can indicate if the training is working. If it is not for example, then the training can be modified. Additionally, the training can provide feedback and suggested improvements. This way the training is revised on a regular basis, it is updated and it is made up-to-date. In return this helps the company save money and have well trained workers who are able to deliver successful projects.

The post training experience can be conducted by either a mentor, who is mentoring the expatriate, or by the expatriate's manager. The expatriate would not be asked to do a self assessment as most individuals are unable to be objective when conducting self-assessments. Post training experience was important and it should be carried out by someone who works with the expatriate and not by the expatriate as people see themselves differently than what they are perceived by others.

5   Conclusion

Project management is not solely a technical activity. It is also highly dependent on the people working on those projects. With the right and adequate cross-cultural training project managers have the ability to learn new skills and behaviour, and alter those behaviours when required and be a high-performing individual .

By using six case studies and conducting in-depth interviews it was possible to gain a rich picture on what challenges project managers face in the UAE. The case studies also provided the researcher with feedback on how they were recruited and why it is important of selecting the right for the overseas job. Additionally, the case studies revealed that in addition to having selected the 'right' employees for the job cross-cultural training is necessary as well to teach and prepare the staff for the unfamiliar environment. This too will help staff in dealing with challenges more appropriately and make the staff more contented and probably more successful in working for that company.

Since people play an important role in every aspect of project management it makes sense to equip them with the necessary tools to perform at their best. It was stressed by many that technical competence was assumed by the companies and clients and the critical dimension was the ability of the company's employees to deliver their skills in a work and culturally sensitive environment.

However, cross-cultural training alone is not enough, the right people need to be recruited. Those individuals need to have the desire to learn and embrace the new culture and environment, to challenge themselves, and to have a positive attitude even when work and life in a foreign country get frustrating. Companies should put in more effort and emphasise their recruitment strategies, because if the wrong employees are selected all the money and time that is allocated towards training them is likely to be wasted.

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