

CHAPTER: 04

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS OF EXPATRIATES AND THEIR ASSIGNMENTS: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

An expat or an expatriate is an individual working or living in a country other than their country of citizenship, temporarily or for work reasons. Boost in technological, transportation and communication facilities have spurred cheaper cross-border exchange of goods and services. Since the opening of economy in 1991, a multitude of Indian sectors have shown exponential growth. Increased globalization, setting of numerous multinational corporations (MNCs) and massive restructuring have headed the way for more and more short-term assignments abroad. The international assignees undertaking these foreign assignments are called 'expatriates' and their success is a critical success determinant for organizations in the today's world. Such assignments involve not only huge direct costs like-pre-departure training, relocation costs, accommodation costs, higher compensation to the expatriates etc.

Keywords: *Expatriates, International Assignments, Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Family Issues, Career Development, Organizational Support, Family Issues, Organizational Issues, Cross Cultural Adjustment Issues.*

INTRODUCTION

Expatriate programs have been a way for companies to compete successfully in the global market. Expatriate programs are a part of a general realization where the focus of the core competencies has been shifted towards Human Resource Management. Companies have acknowledged that by providing their workers training and

development opportunities as a way to build their stock of human capital internationally. Since companies are eager to send the workers abroad, the importance of providing the right tools for an expatriate in the new culture have been downsized or even neglected due to factors such as time and costs. The globalization of businesses has led to an increasing trend in international assignments, with expatriates playing a crucial role in the success of multinational corporations (MNCs). However, despite the numerous benefits associated with expatriate assignments, they are often accompanied by a plethora of challenges and concerns. This paper aims to provide a detailed examination of the issues faced by expatriates during their assignments, ranging from cultural adaptation to family-related challenges and career development. By identifying and addressing these challenges, organizations can better support their expatriate workforce and enhance the effectiveness of international assignments. There are various reasons why companies are interested in expatriate programs. Expatriate programs offer possibilities for company's talented employees to broaden their views of the company, gain experiences and networks over normal company borders. In a corporate level companies have the opportunity to share and learn new better ways of doing things locally. This paper will delve into the multifaceted challenges faced by expatriates during their assignments, providing insights into the complexities of international mobility and offering practical recommendations for organizations to better support their expatriate workforce. Through a comprehensive analysis of the issues and concerns outlined in this paper, organizations can enhance the success and effectiveness of their international assignments while fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment for their global workforce. Expatriate assignments refer to the temporary relocation of employees from their home country to a foreign location to work on behalf of their employer. These assignments are prevalent in multinational corporations (MNCs) and are a crucial component of global business operations. Expatriate assignments can vary in duration, ranging from short-term assignments lasting a few months to long-term assignments spanning several years.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Expatriate assignments, where individuals are sent to work in a foreign country for a specific period, have become increasingly common in today's globalized economy. While these assignments offer numerous benefits to both the individual and the organization, they also come with a range of challenges and concerns that need to be addressed for successful outcomes. Several authors discussed SIEs (Self-Initiated Expatriates) well and have given a deep understanding of the concept (Doherty, 2013; McNulty and Brewster, 2017). Studies reveal that SIEs like to move to countries that have the same culture, tradition and system (Doherty et al., 2010; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010). SIEs are defined as individuals who are individually accountable for their career without the direct support of an organization (Carr et al., 2005). Hence, individuals who take the decision to reside and have a job overseas are called SIEs. SIEs expatriates have been called with different names in literature such as self-selecting expatriates (Richardson and McKenna, 2003), self-initiated movers (Thorn, 2009), self-

designed apprenticeship (Arthur et al., 1999) and free travelers (Myers and Pringle, 2005). SIEs are people who decide to take up an international assignment overseas and they are not sent by anyone to work in the international marketplace (Harrison et al., 2004). Moreover, SIEs are basically those people who relocate to a country of their choice in order to find their desirable job or attempt to find some business opportunities in the overseas market. Some of the characteristics of SIEs can be listed as, first, SIEs are individuals who are mostly below 30 years old and love to work, travel and stay overseas. Second, the SIEs are individuals who are actively looking for employment overseas, or are not happy with their current employment. Third, even former organizational expatriates contribute to the community of SIEs in the overseas markets. Fourth, SIEs are mostly dual career couples, either of the partners find a job overseas and they decide to move as a family. Fifth, SIEs are commonly well qualified and experts who support international professional careers and companies hire them to fill the shortage of qualified managerial employees in the market (Jokinen et al., 2008; Saxenian, 2005). Literature review also revealed that SIEs have different motives while moving overseas such as having the craving to go abroad and see the world, to meet career ambitions and get away from existing situations (Doherty et al., 2011; Carr et al., 2005). Moreover, SIEs desire to enhance their lifestyle and quality of living rather than shift for financial motives (Richardson and McKenna, 2003). SIEs are furthermore motivated to take up international assignments in order to find out about different cultural surroundings and establish fresh global networks (Myers and Pringle, 2005). Development of cross-cultural understanding, career outlook, enthusiasm, connecting with new and different citizens are some other factors motivating SIEs to take international assignments in the overseas market (Tharenou, 2003). Last but not the least (Dickmann et al 2008; Peltokorpi and Froese, 2009) mentioned that SIEs show better cultural adjustment, capability to acclimatize to the host country and assurance in their ability to reside and work overseas than organizational expatriates. Furthermore, SIEs have a better understanding of the host country culture and hence their adoption during international assignments is easier (Sargent, 2003). SIEs also value and extremely welcome interpersonal relationships (Bozionelos, 2009). SIEs are globally positional workforce (Myers and Pringle, 2005). SIEs never change their citizenship despite the fact that they have chances of getting citizenship of another country during overseas employment. They often change jobs and organizations but return to their home countries at the end of the day. The results of SIEs expectancies and motivational goals study shows that SIEs who had greater confidence in their ability to live and work abroad were also more likely to move to pursue performance goals. They also reported greater host adjustment and superior professional accomplishments, but not higher family achievements or success (Pinto et al., 2020). Further, a recent study conducted in China, showed that career adaptability was significantly related to performance and adjustment as well as to psychological availability. Those SIEs with higher career adaptability may have better performance and adjustment because they have greater resources to draw upon to cope with evolving work and cultural uncertainties and demands. Because SIEs with higher levels of career adaptability have more resources, they can devote more energy to effective

performance and adjustment. But, being fully engaged at work may not greatly influence SIEs' adjustment because adjustment may be more dependent on other factors (e.g., spouse's adjustment, having an HCN as a mentor) (Jannesari and Sullivan, 2019a, 2019b). The various challenges affecting the implementation of international assignee selection programs are reviewed below. These include the large influence of non-work predictors of the international assignment success (e.g., issues with children and spouse, spouse career etc.), the differences among firms in their prioritization of international assignment selection, and the generally low utilization of international assignee selection. Spouse adjustment is an important topic since their adjustment and adjustment of repatriate influence each other reciprocally. The study of Gregersen and Stroh (1998) showed that financial and housing conditions after repatriation, social status at home country, time spent overseas and cultural distance between host and home countries influence spouse adjustment. In addition, their interaction with people and meeting of expectations upon their return appeared as other factors (Hammer et al., 1998). It should be noted that spouses' career prospects after return also influence this process (Andreasen & Kinneer, 2005; Hammer et al., 1998). Spouses may need to quit their jobs due to the geographic move and the inability to transport their work or may be unable to work once arriving due to limitations on work visas. Children's education will also affect the success of international assignments as children need to change schools – and begin again in a new school with the associated social and academic upheaval. (Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi et al., 1998). Further, members of the family may be without their familiar supports – friends, extended families, hobbies, pastimes, sports, faith communities, and more. Past research has found that international assignees' family-level characteristics (i.e., family's cohesion, communication, adaptability, and interest in the relocation) are related to family-level cross cultural adjustment to live in a foreign country – and that family adjustment, in turn, is a mediator of the relationship between family characteristics and expatriate adjustment to working in the host country.

Objectives of the study:

- To identify strategies for success to thrive in new environment.
- To explore adjustment issues.
- To inform about the organizational policies.

1. Overview of Expatriate Assignments

- **Knowledge transfer and skills development:** Expatriates are often selected for their expertise in specific areas, and their assignments aim to transfer knowledge and skills to the host country's workforce. This helps to build local capabilities and enhance the overall effectiveness of operations.

- **Global leadership development:** Expatriate assignments offer employees the opportunity to gain valuable international experience and develop cross-cultural leadership skills. By working in diverse environments, expatriates can broaden their perspectives and become more effective leaders in a global context.
- **Strategic business expansion:** Expatriate assignments play a vital role in supporting MNCs' strategic initiatives, such as market expansion, mergers and acquisitions, and establishing new operations in foreign markets. Expatriates provide the necessary expertise and leadership to navigate the complexities of international business environments.

2. Stages of Expatriate Assignments

- **Selection and preparation:** Employees selected for expatriate assignments undergo a rigorous selection process based on their skills, experience, and suitability for the role. They receive pre-departure training to prepare them for the challenges of living and working in a foreign country, including cultural awareness, language skills, and practical considerations such as housing and healthcare.
- **Assignment execution:** Once in the host country, expatriates carry out their assigned roles, which may involve managing local teams, implementing business strategies, and liaising with stakeholders. They must adapt to the local culture, work practices, and business environment while maintaining communication and collaboration with colleagues in their home country.
- **Support and adjustment:** Expatriates often face various challenges during their assignments, including cultural differences, language barriers, and homesickness. Organizations provide support mechanisms such as mentorship, counseling, and expatriate networks to help expatriates adjust to their new environment and overcome challenges.
- **Repatriation:** At the end of their assignment, expatriates return to their home country, a process known as repatriation. This phase involves transitioning back into the home organization, reintegrating into the workforce, and leveraging their international experience for career development opportunities.

IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

Understanding the challenges and concerns of expatriate assignments is crucial for several reasons, encompassing both the well-being of the expatriates themselves and the success of

international business operations. Below are the key reasons highlighting the importance of comprehending these challenges:

- **Enhanced Employee Support:** Awareness of the challenges expatriates face allows organizations to provide tailored support mechanisms. By understanding the specific needs of expatriates, organizations can offer resources such as cultural training, language classes, and counseling services to facilitate successful adaptation to the host country.
- **Retention and Engagement:** Addressing the concerns of expatriates can contribute to higher levels of job satisfaction, retention, and engagement. Expatriate assignments often involve significant personal sacrifices and adjustments, and organizations that prioritize the well-being of their expatriate employees are more likely to retain top talent and maintain employee morale.
- **Mitigation of Assignment Failure:** Failure rates for expatriate assignments can be high, often due to challenges related to cultural adaptation, family issues, or career development concerns. Understanding these challenges enables organizations to proactively mitigate risks and increase the likelihood of assignment success through targeted support and intervention strategies.
- **Maximized Return on Investment:** Expatriate assignments represent a significant investment for organizations in terms of recruitment, training, and relocation costs. By addressing the challenges and concerns of expatriates, organizations can maximize the return on investment by ensuring that expatriates are productive, engaged, and successful in their roles abroad.
- **Cultural Competence and Global Effectiveness:** Expatriate assignments provide valuable opportunities for cultural exchange and global collaboration. Understanding the challenges faced by expatriates enhances cultural competence within organizations and fosters a more inclusive and diverse work environment.
- **Strengthened Employer Brand:** Organizations that demonstrate a commitment to supporting their expatriate workforce enhance their reputation as employers of choice. A positive employer brand not only attracts top talent but also strengthens relationships with current employees, customers, and stakeholders, ultimately contributing to the organization's long-term success and sustainability.
- **Compliance and Risk Management:** Awareness of legal, regulatory, and security challenges associated with expatriate assignments is essential for compliance and risk management. Organizations must ensure that expatriates are adequately prepared and supported to navigate complex legal and administrative requirements, minimizing the potential for legal liabilities or security breaches.

CULTURAL ADAPTATION CHALLENGES

Cultural adaptation challenges for expatriates represent one of the most significant aspects of their international assignments. These challenges stem from differences in cultural norms, values, beliefs, communication styles, and social expectations between the expatriates' home country and the host country. Below are some common cultural adaptation challenges expatriates may encounter:

- **Culture Shock:** Expatriates often experience culture shock upon arrival in the host country, characterized by feelings of disorientation, frustration, and anxiety. This arises from the unfamiliarity with local customs, languages, social norms, and daily routines. Culture shock can affect expatriates' emotional well-being and hinder their ability to adjust to the new environment.
- **Communication Barriers:** Language differences and communication styles can pose significant challenges for expatriates. Misinterpretation of verbal and nonverbal cues, difficulty expressing oneself effectively, and navigating linguistic nuances can lead to misunderstandings and interpersonal conflicts. Expatriates may also struggle to communicate with local colleagues, clients, and stakeholders, impacting their ability to build relationships and collaborate effectively.
- **Workplace Culture Differences:** Variations in workplace culture, management practices, and decision-making processes between the expatriates' home and host countries can create challenges. Expatriates may encounter differences in hierarchical structures, attitudes towards authority, approaches to teamwork, and expectations around work-life balance. Adapting to these differences requires flexibility, open-mindedness, and a willingness to learn new ways of working.
- **Social Integration:** Expatriates may face difficulties integrating into the social fabric of the host country. Building social connections, making friends, and establishing a support network outside of work can be challenging, particularly in cultures where social relationships are deeply ingrained. Expatriates may also experience feelings of isolation or loneliness, especially if they are geographically distant from their home country and family members.
- **Cultural Values and Norms:** Differences in cultural values, attitudes, and norms can influence various aspects of daily life, including interpersonal relationships, decision-making processes, and social interactions. Expatriates may encounter cultural values that conflict with their own beliefs or expectations, leading to feelings of frustration or discomfort.
- **Identity and Self-Expression:** Expatriates may grapple with questions of identity and self-expression in the host country. They may navigate issues related to cultural identity,

belongingness, and authenticity, particularly if they perceive themselves as cultural outsiders or face challenges in assimilating into the local culture. Balancing their own cultural identity with the expectations of the host culture can be a source of internal conflict for expatriates.

- **Cross-Cultural Adjustment:** Adjusting to a new cultural environment is a gradual process that requires time, patience, and resilience. Expatriates may undergo stages of cultural adaptation, including initial euphoria, culture shock, adjustment, and acceptance. Building cultural competence, developing intercultural skills, and seeking support from peers, mentors, or cultural advisors can facilitate the process of cross-cultural adjustment.

STRATEGIES FOR NURTURING WORK-LIFE HARMONY FOR THE EXPATRIATES

As the expatriates navigate the intricate tapestry of professional and personal realms on foreign soil, the implementation of these strategies becomes instrumental. The ability to adapt, communicate effectively, and prioritize well-being forms the bedrock of a fulfilling expatriate experience. Here are five impactful strategies that professionals adopt to foster equilibrium:

- **Establishing clear boundaries:** Creating well-defined boundaries between professional commitments and personal life is foundational. Setting explicit working hours and dedicated personal time aids in preserving a healthy balance. Effectively communicating these boundaries with colleagues and superiors promotes mutual understanding and supports a sustainable work-life dynamic.
- **Embracing technology for connection:** Leveraging technology becomes pivotal in staying connected with family and friends back in India. Regular video calls, instant messaging, and virtual family gatherings serve as vital tools to bridge the geographical gap. Embracing these digital avenues nurtures a sense of closeness and familial bonds across distances.
- **Cultural integration activities:** Actively participating in cultural integration activities within both the expatriate and local communities facilitates a smoother transition. Involvement in local events, festivals, or community groups provides a profound sense of belonging and a robust support system. Embracing the cultural fabric of the new environment becomes a source of enrichment.
- **Negotiating flexible work arrangements:** Exploring and negotiating flexible work arrangements emerge as valuable strategies in the pursuit of work-life balance. Many forward-thinking companies acknowledge the diverse needs of their international workforce. Flexible schedules, remote work options, or compressed workweeks contribute significantly to the well-being of expatriate professionals.

- **Prioritizing physical and mental well-being:** Prioritizing personal well-being, both physically and mentally, is a non-negotiable aspect of maintaining equilibrium. Regular exercise, mindfulness practices, and actively seeking social support are integral components. These practices not only contribute to resilience in the face of challenges but also enhance overall life satisfaction.

ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT MECHANISMS

Organizational support mechanisms for expatriates are essential for ensuring their successful integration into a new work environment and culture. These mechanisms help to alleviate the challenges and stressors that expatriates may face while living and working abroad. Here are some key organizational support mechanisms for expatriates:

- **Pre-departure Training:** Before departing for their assignment, expatriates should undergo comprehensive training programs that cover cultural orientation, language training, job responsibilities, and practical aspects of living in the host country. This helps prepare them for the challenges they may encounter and sets realistic expectations.
- **Relocation Assistance:** Organizations should provide support for expatriates and their families in relocating to the new country. This may include assistance with visa and immigration processes, finding housing, schools for children, healthcare facilities, and other essential services.
- **Cross-cultural Training:** Cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and communication barriers. Cross-cultural training helps expatriates understand the cultural norms, values, and communication styles of the host country, enabling them to adapt more easily to their new environment.
- **Mentorship and Support Networks:** Establishing mentorship programs or support networks with experienced expatriates or local employees can provide valuable guidance and support to newcomers. These networks can offer advice, share experiences, and help expatriates navigate the challenges of living and working in a foreign country.
- **Spousal Support Programs:** Recognizing the importance of spousal adjustment in the success of expatriate assignments, organizations may offer support programs specifically tailored to the needs of expatriates' spouses or partners. This can include assistance with finding employment, social integration, and access to resources and activities.
- **Repatriation Assistance:** As expatriates complete their assignments and prepare to return home, organizations should provide support for their reintegration into the home country.

This may involve assistance with career planning, repatriation training, and ensuring that the skills and experiences gained abroad are effectively utilized within the organization.

- **Ongoing Communication and Feedback:** Maintaining regular communication with expatriates throughout their assignment allows organizations to address any issues or concerns promptly and provide additional support as needed. Feedback mechanisms can also help organizations continuously improve their expatriate support programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS:

When considering organizations for expatriates, it's important to look for groups that offer support, resources, and community for individuals living abroad. Here are some recommendations:

- **Inter Nations:** It is one of the largest expat communities worldwide. It offers networking opportunities, forums, and local events to help expatriates connect with each other and navigate life in a new country.
- **Expatriate.com:** Expatriate.com is a global platform designed to support people living abroad. It provides forums, guides, classifieds, and job listings tailored to expatriates' needs.
- **Global Connection:** Global Connection is an organization that provides support services to expatriates and their families, including cultural training, language courses, and relocation assistance.
- **Local Expatriate Groups:** Many cities and regions have their own expatriate groups or clubs where individuals can connect with others from their home country or with similar backgrounds. These groups often organize social events, language exchanges, and support networks.
- **Expatriate Women:** Expatriate Women is a community and resource hub specifically designed for women living abroad. It offers articles, forums, and networking opportunities focused on the unique experiences and challenges faced by female expatriates.
- **Rotary International:** Rotary clubs exist in many countries around the world and offer opportunities for networking, community service, and social connections, which can be particularly valuable for expatriates looking to integrate into their new communities.
- **Professional Associations:** Depending on your profession, there may be international or local professional associations that cater to expatriates. These organizations often provide networking events, career support, and professional development opportunities.
- **Churches and Religious Organizations:** For those who are religious, local churches or religious organizations can provide a sense of community and support for expatriates living abroad.

- **Language Exchange Groups:** Joining language exchange groups can be a great way for expatriates to meet locals and other expats while improving their language skills.
- **International Schools:** International schools often have parent-teacher associations or other support networks for families living abroad.

CONCLUSION

The international assignments are considered to be the milestones in the progress of an organization to grow at global level. To develop managers competent to handle the international assignments is a major resource for an organization. Expatriate assignments offer unique opportunities for personal and professional growth, but they also present significant challenges and concerns for both expatriates and organizations. From cultural adjustment and family issues to career development and work-life balance, addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses pre-departure training, ongoing support, and effective repatriation strategies. By understanding and mitigating these challenges, organizations can enhance the success and effectiveness of their expatriate assignments in an increasingly globalized business environment. Those in charge of the MNCs' international training and learning program should provide training needed to protect expatriate managers and employees from career development risks, reentry problems, and culture shock. Understanding the challenges and concerns of expatriate assignments is essential for fostering employee well-being, driving organizational success, and maintaining a competitive edge in the global marketplace. By proactively addressing these challenges, organizations can optimize the effectiveness of their expatriate workforce and create a supportive and inclusive work environment conducive to international success.

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