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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Naithani, P., & Jha, A. (2009). Model of expatriate adjustment and framework for organisational support. *The Alternative: Journal of Management Studies and Research*, 8(1), 34-41. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-457509>

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Model of expatriate adjustment and framework for organisational support

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Abstract

Increasing globalisation of workforce has resulted into a large population of expatriate workers who engage in temporary work outside their home country. Along with monetary benefits, expatriate assignment is closely associated with a number of challenges which influence adjustment of an expatriate in a foreign country. This paper presents an expatriate adjustment model derived from review of research papers published on expatriate adjustment in the last two decades. Later section of this paper presents major internal and external expatriate support factors. The paper concludes with suggestion of a multilevel action plan at organisational level to support expatriate adjustment.

Introduction

Expatriates are workers in foreign country who engage in work of temporary nature. Expatriates face a wide gamut of challenges and problems which influence their work and personal life. The challenges are in several categories: work, career, social and cultural, individual psychographic, individual demographic, family and other factors. Following section of the paper presents a model of expatriate adjustment which highlights the common challenges faced by expatriates. An expatriate faces these challenges along with accompanying family and needs greater contribution of organisational support for a successful completion of overseas assignment.

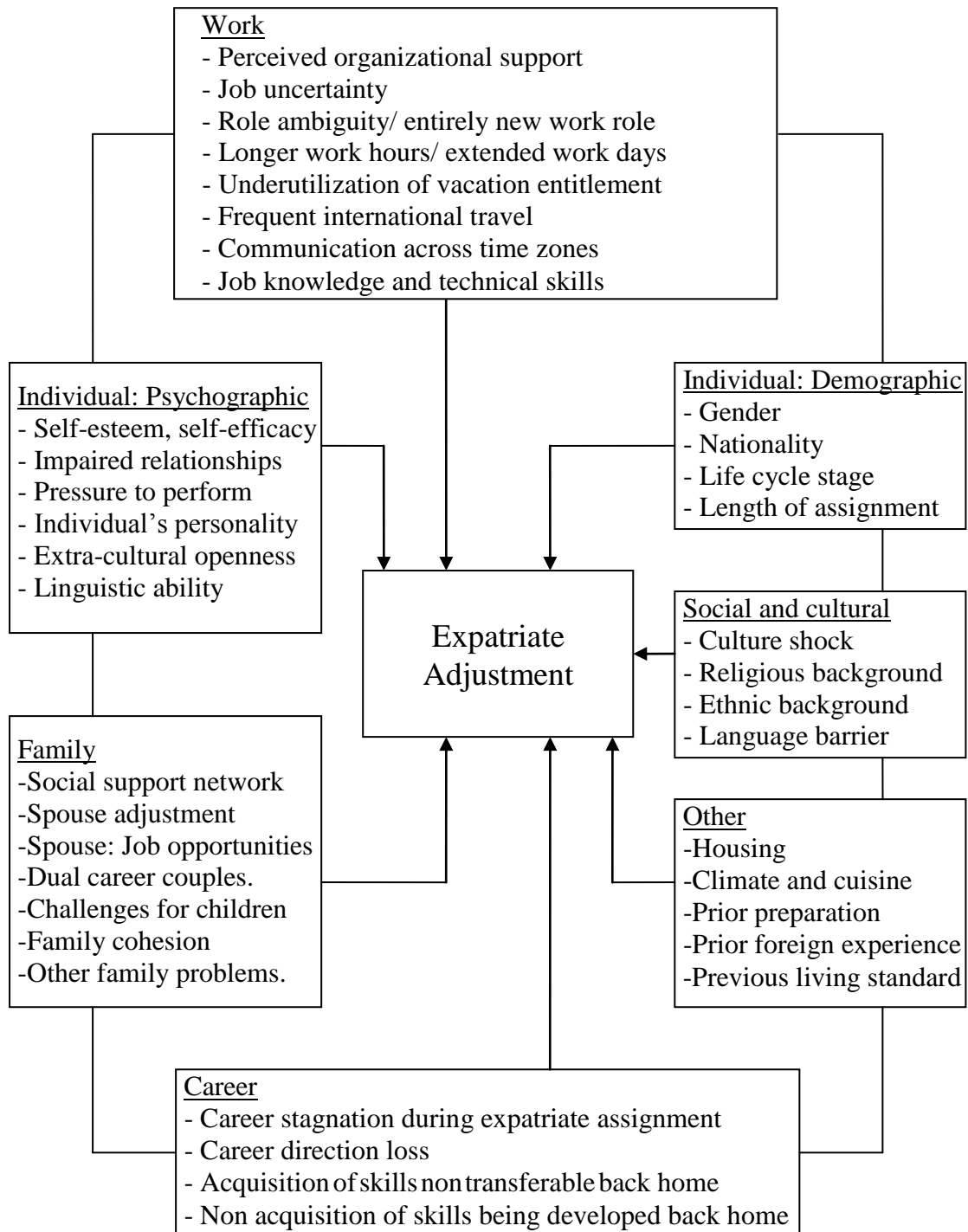
Problems of expatriates: Model of expatriate adjustment

Some of the common challenges and problems, which have been compiled and categorized from literature of last two decades on expatriates, are presented in the expatriate adjustment model (figure one).

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Figure One: Model of Expatriate Adjustment *



*Compiled from: Doherty et al. 2008; Haslberger 2008; Minter 2008; Koteswari and Bhattacharya 2007; McKenna and Richardson 2007; ORC 2007; Templer et al. 2006; Chang 2005; MacDonald and Arthur 2005; Mol et al. 2005.

Adjustment at workplace: Perceived organisational support

With reference to work related challenges faced by expatriates, perceived organizational support is of great importance. Initial adjustment and long term success of expatriate's assignment depends a lot on the belief of the employee that the employer is committed to supporting employee's well being.

Organisation support further extends through quality of superior-subordinate relationship and psychological acceptance by local colleagues. Non acceptance by local colleagues, seniors and subordinates creates negative impact on expatriate's work (Koteswari and Bhattacharya 2007). Further, managerial style within the organization influences the quality of superior-subordinate interactions (Koteswari and Bhattacharya 2007). Organizational support is perceived through range of interactions an employee indulges in, with the management, senior, colleagues and subordinates. If the reflection of these interactions is positive then the perceived organizational support helps an expatriate to adjust well with the work and workplace.

Adjustment at work place: Other factors

Expatriates are temporary workers, as such perceived job uncertainty and its negative impact on work is higher in expatriate assignments. Expatriates also commonly face entirely new job roles, which might be clubbed with need of new set of job knowledge and technical skills (Mol et al. 2005) and if the job roles are ambiguous then role ambiguity adds on to the negative impact on work adjustment (ORC 2007). Sometimes due to inadequate selection process an expatriate may face a mismatched job profile (Minter 2008) which again enhances job related stress. Additional causes of work related stress noticed in recent surveys are longer working hours, extended work days/weeks, underutilization of entitled vacations, frequent international travel and communicating across different time zones (ORC 2007).

Career and expatriate adjustment

Poor career growth, career direction loss and undervalue of present work in home country are some of the commonly cited career related challenges which an expatriate

faces (Minter 2008; Koteswari and Bhattacharya 2007) and sometimes is a prime reason for rejection of overseas job opportunity. Another concern for a career conscious expatriate is acquisition of skills which might be non transferable to future work in parent country and non acquisition of new skills being developed in parent country. These factors affect the perception of future employment opportunities of an expatriate.

Social and cultural challenges and expatriate adjustment

Expatriates also face social and cultural challenges (ORC 2007). Culture shock occurs amongst expatriates due to differences in social and cultural value between the parent and host country. Cross-cultural adjustment is a prime factor in expatriate adjustment as success in host country is often dependent on expatriate's and accompanying family's cross-cultural adjustment (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2005).

Majority of expatriate adjustment literature doesn't address the issue of religion and cross-cultural adjustment, because most of the expatriate adjustment literature and research is confined to developed nations. In the Islamic regions and nations, such as the Middle East countries, a Muslim foreigner is easily socially accepted (Mamman 1995) and language or other barriers are lesser evident in social acceptance of Muslim expatriates by locals in the Middle East countries (Mamman 1995). Another culture related issue which has still not been addressed properly is the differences in ethnic background and its impact on expatriate adjustment in a foreign country.

An expatriate has to undergo interaction adjustment in the host country through speaking, interacting and socializing with local workers and local public in general. (Haslberger 2008). Language barrier is another important factor which influences expatriate adjustment (ORC 2007), and sometimes is a prime reason for non acceptance of overseas job opportunity.

Psychographic factors and expatriate adjustment

Expatriate adjustment in a foreign country has direct psychological impact on personal self esteem and may also impair personal relationships (Templer et al. 2006).

Understanding of expatriate psychographics is an important area in expatriate adjustment because personal psychological factors such as motivation, relational skills, flexibility/adaptability and extra-cultural openness have a direct impact on expatriate adjustment (Mol et al. 2005). Psychological factors such as individual's personality, emotional maturity, adaptability help cope up with work and performance related pressures in a new country and extra-cultural openness helps an expatriate to adjust socially and culturally.

Demographic factors and expatriate adjustment

Personal demographic factors such as gender, nationality, age and length of assignment also influence expatriate adjustment. Women are found to be more prone to overseas assignment related stress and assignment failure. Longer duration of overseas assignment increases the ability to adjust and enhances chances of success of an assignment. According to Mamman (1995), age plays an important role in success of an expatriate assignment. In general, younger a person, higher is the chance of successful overseas assignment. But in some specific cases, and in cultures, where age is given better respect by the society, older age might bring in higher social status and help in adjustment (Mamman 1995).

Family's influence on expatriate adjustment

Majority of expatriates are accompanied by family (spouse/children or both) and according to different estimates the range of such expatriates is between 60 to 80 percent (Haslberger and Brewster 2008). Increasing numbers of dual career couples are accepting overseas jobs but only one third of the working partners continue to work during expatriate assignment (Haslberger and Brewster 2008). Dual career couples face typical adjustment problems such as poor job opportunities for spouse and lack of childcare facilities. Negative impact of expatriate assignment on work-life balance and difficulties in personal and family arrangements are important reasons why some overseas assignments are rejected. Expatriates with accompanying family face common problems such as loss of social support network of family, friends and peers in home country, difficulties in spouse adjustment to a different physical and cultural environment and poor job opportunities for spouse (ORC 2007), difficulties

in children adjusting to new school, new friends, new environment and new language. Under such conditions family cohesion and family adaptability plays an important role in success of overseas assignment (Mol et al. 2005)

Other factors related to general adjustment of expatriate

Expatriate adjustment is also influenced by cost of living, housing, climate, cuisine, entertainment, recreation and healthcare facilities (Haslberger 2008). Other factors which play an important role in success of an expatriate assignment are: prior preparation for assignment and previous work experience in a foreign country. Lack of proper orientation and training to expatriates in helping them cope up with overseas assignment has been cited as another important reason of expatriate failure (Minter 2008)

Expatriate assignment and positive impact on work-life balance

Caligiuri and Lazarova (2005) argue that not everything is negative about expatriate assignment and depending on individual personality and professional objectives; expatriate assignment can bring in many positive aspects such as high degree of personal development, new learning experience and create a better work-life balance for an individual. An individual who has an outgoing personality, is keen on travel, has linguistic capabilities and has desire to learn will have a higher degree of satisfaction and better work-life balance in expatriate assignment (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2005)

Framework for organisational support

As discussed in the suggested expatriate adjustment model, there are multidimensional challenges faced by an expatriate during overseas assignment. Successful handling of challenges by an expatriate depends on internal factors such as personal psychographics and personal demographics as well as following two categories of external support factors.

Major support factors at workplace:

- Management of employer organisation

- Colleagues of nationality of country of work and other foreign colleagues
- Colleagues at work sharing common home country
- Government labour laws, at country of work, protecting expatriate interests

Major support factors at social and personal level:

- Family (if living along with expatriate during overseas assignment)
- Social support network of colleagues of nationality of country of work
- Social support network of other expatriates belonging to the same home country
- Social support network of other colleagues

At the first level, organisations with large expatriate workforce need to design a selection process which aligns the work demands of expatriate assignment with the personal psychographics (self esteem, self efficacy, extra-cultural openness, linguistic ability) and demographics (gender, nationality, life cycle stage, length of assignment) of an individual expatriate employee.

This should be followed by a second level pre-assignment orientation and training at home country prior to joining the foreign workplace. This orientation programme may be of two parts. Part one may consist details on new work role, degree of expected job knowledge and technical skills and part two may consist details on new culture, ethnic and religion factors (if any), simple ways to solve preliminary language barriers at workplace (if applicable) and ways to adjust to a new climate and cuisine.

At the third level, at the joining time, the organisation should provide assistance for preliminary adjustment of expatriate with housing assistance and support for family adjustment (if applicable) with referrals and help for spouse's and child's adjustment. The third level can be broadened to child's school admission assistance and spouse job search assistance.

At the fourth level, the employee organisation should aim at providing direct support at workplace to the expatriate employees through management support, supportive organisational culture (encouraging support from local colleagues and colleagues of same home country) and regular career and skills development programmes.

At the fifth level of assistance, the organisation should assist the expatriate employee in social integration with the new culture and society by encouraging groups of expatriate employees to develop inter group social support network as well as intra group social support network by helping the employees to socially approach other expatriates of the same home country. This can be executed by initiating/supporting locally based expatriate social and cultural clubs. Further, organisations should also encourage social interactions of local employees with expatriate employees as well as interaction of expatriate employees with local nationals outside workplace.

Conclusion

Expatriate adjustment model suggested in this paper covers the important factors influencing expatriates performance and success in overseas assignment. Suggested framework for multi-level organisational support programme aims at assisting an expatriate employee in pre assignment preparation, as well as initial, medium term and long term adjustment in a foreign country and at a new workplace.

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