

Selection Of Expatriates: Adaptability to Cultural Change

Introduction

Adaptability to cultural change plays a crucial role in the selection of expatriates. This paper provides an overview of the impact of cultural environment on expatriates, how expatriates suffer from cultural distance, which results in cultural shock, the inability to adapt to new environment. It then further discusses the coping strategies characterized by socio-cultural and psychological adjustments and characteristics candidates should possess for foreign assignments, and finally some important criteria are given for the determination of candidates.

Influence of cultural environment on expatriates

The selection of an expatriate manager for a global assignment could be strongly influenced by the type of cultural environment to which the individual will be assigned (Harvey, 1996). Harvey & Novicevic (2001) state that the cultural distance between the home and host countries needs to be assessed in the expatriate selection process because it affects the nature of the expatriate task. They note that it is significantly more difficult for expatriates to contribute to the expertise of foreign operations if the cultures of the two countries are too dissimilar.

As noted by Gomez-Mejita and Palich (1997), cultural distance is measured as a composite index of Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Cultural distance affects an expatriate's understanding of decision-making processes, work values, negotiation patterns, wholly owned subsidiaries, and fairness in reciprocity (1997). Also, Kashlak (1999) indicates that the degree of cultural distance will influence performance ambiguity and task definition. As a result, an expatriate's task programmability and performance measurability will be inversely related to the cultural distance (Harvey & Novicevic, 2001).

Stone (2002) finds that most expatriates living overseas experience culture shock as the result of stress overload. Culture shock, according to Harzing & Ruysseveldt (1995, p126), is “a multifaceted experience resulting from numerous stressors occurring in contact with a different culture”. Research (cited in Hodgetts & Luthans, 2003) shows that many managers are exhilarated at the beginning of their

overseas assignment. It indicates many of the most effective international managers encounter frustration and feel confused in their new environment, which may result in the improper implementing of company strategies.

Adapting to a new environment

Mendenhall & Oddou (1994) discover that the top two reasons of expatriate failure in U.S. multinationals, which are the manager's inability to cope with a different physical or cultural environment, and inability of the manager's spouse to adjust to a different physical or cultural environment. Stone's study also found that both managers and expatriate managers perceive the essential selection as being the expatriate's ability to adapt and adaptability of the spouse and family (Stone, 2002).

Caligiuri (cited in Hodgetts & Luthans, 2003), after examining how nationals help expatriates adjust, has reported that certain types of personality characteristics are important in this process. In particular, her findings suggest that greater contact with host national helps with cross-cultural adjustment when the person also possesses the personality trait of openness; she also found that sociability was directly related to effective adjustment (Hodgetts & Luthans, 2003).

In research recently conducted among expatriates in China, Selmar (cited in Schell & Solomon, 1997) found that those who were best able to deal with their new situation had developed coping strategies characterized by socio-cultural and psychological adjustments including: feeling comfortable that their work challenges can be met, being able to adjust to their new living conditions, learning how to interact well with host-country national's outside of work, and feeling reasonably happy and being able to enjoy ones day-to-day activities.

Guodu Michael Tucker (cited in Schell & Solomon, 1997) of Tucker international has studied expatriate assignments since 1973. His research with thousands of expatriates identifies six basic characteristics that distinguish those who adapt well to a new society. They are acceptance, knowledge, positive emotions, lifestyle, interaction, and communication. Michael (cited in Schell & Solomon, 1997) states that the task facing managers who select expatriates is to find people who will exhibit these six

characteristics. With these characters, she notes, expatriates can successfully decrease their stress level, understand behavior of foreigners, and effectively interact with others.

Selection criteria

Since expatriates confront many new challenges both in the workplace and the foreign society, expatriate selection is much more difficult than the selection of personnel for a position in the home country (Raymond J. Stone, 2002). Hodgetts & Luthans (2003) state that overseas managers need a degree of cultural toughness. Organizations examine a number of characteristics in determining whether an individual is sufficiently adaptable. Examples include work experiences with culture other than one's own, previous overseas travel, knowledge of foreign languages (fluency generally is not necessary), and recent immigration background or heritage.

Others include: The ability to integrate with different people, cultures, and types of business organizations; The ability to sense developments in the host country and accurately evaluate them; The ability to solve problems within different frameworks and from different perspectives; Sensitivity to the fine print of differences of culture, politics, religion, and ethics; And flexibility in managing operations on a continuous basis despite lack of assistance and gaps in information. These criteria, explained by Hodgetts & Luthans (2003) are essential in the process of international HR selection. They note that organizations may be aware of the importance of such factors, but give them little weight in the actual selection process. However, people with those abilities are most likely to succeed in the foreign assignment.

To accomplish the task, Tucker (cited in Schell & Solomon, 1997) developed an assessment instrument called the Oversea Assignment Inventory (OAI), a tool that identifies and measures 14 predictors of success on a foreign assignment. Part of the predictors include expectations, open-mindedness, respect for other beliefs, social adaptability, spouse communication, interpersonal interest, Sense of Humor.

According to Tucker's research, different countries have different preferences for the OAI criteria. For example, candidates considered for assignment to Malaysia are required to have a high degree in the area

of respecting for others, spouse communication, and sense of humor. On the other hand, assignments in Saudi Arabia highlight the characteristics of Open-mindedness, and tolerance (Schell & Solomon, 1997).

Conclusion

Culture environment could strongly influence expatriate manager for global assignment. Researches show that one of the top reasons for failure of international managers is their inability to adapt to a new environment. Many of them, including the most effective international managers, suffer from culture shock because of the culture distance among countries. Some personality characteristics and coping strategies are found to be critical for expatriates to conquer cultural barriers, such as open-mindedness, acceptance, etc. Based on these researches, various criteria are provided in the paper for international human resource selection.

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