

# ENHANCING WORK GROUP SOCIALIZATION FOR EXPATRIATES: A PROFILE INSTRUMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ATTRIBUTES FOR CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION

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*As the global economy expands, American expatriate assignments will continue to increase and yet, the failure rate of expatriate assignments remains high. One critical source of this failure is the lack of cross-cultural adaptation for expatriate candidates that affects their socialization process in the foreign assignment. Yet, cross-cultural adaptation might be as much a psychological attribute as a skill that can be developed in training. Incorporating the literature on several issues including workplace socialization, in-group/out-group bias, and expatriate training, this paper explores the psychological attributes of cross-cultural adaptation. A profile inventory that needs validation is presented to determine whether an expatriate candidate possesses certain critical traits. Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou (1991) recognized the paucity of adequate expatriate research, noting that the existing literature is primarily anecdotal or atheoretical. This paper attempts to fill that void by providing a theoretical framework to study expatriate selection, so that the socialization process is facilitated.*

The new economic age is characterized as increasingly global, high-tech, information-intensive, multi-cultural, fast-paced, and unpredictable, and this economic scenario creates many issues for multi-national corporations and especially, American expatriate employees who are often placed in a cultural context demanding recognition of difference. Hall states in his landmark work, *Beyond Culture* (1976:82), that this difference “creates problems for Americans because we are intolerant of differences [believing] that if something is different it is therefore inferior.”

This culturally learned, unconscious and therefore, ostensibly pragmatic position usually acts as a separating agent for American expatriate employees which ultimately affects their workplace socialization in their foreign assignment. International and thus, cross-cultural contacts often act as a probe, bringing into question unique cultural beliefs and practices that are deeply rooted in the daily lives of people which can easily evoke reactions of anxiety, aversion, and even hostility. The current ethnocentrically based global theories of work behavior practiced in most of organizational America are inadequate in dealing with the international sector (Erez & Earley, 1993).

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Indeed, Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou (1991) recognized the paucity of adequate expatriate research, noting that the existing literature is primarily anecdotal or atheoretical with no systematic evaluation of the psychological, social, and behavioral attributes that contribute to a successful expatriate assignment. What has been lacking is a solid model or theoretical framework and supporting empirical evidence. This paper attempts to fill that void by providing a theoretical framework to study expatriate selection so that organizational socialization process is facilitated.

## DISCUSSION

### Status of Expatriate Employee Assignments

In the 1990s, approximately 80,000 expatriate employees work in 130 countries (Guzzo, Noonan, & Elron, 1994). The corporate investment in expatriate assignments is staggering: Maintenance of an employee abroad costs two to three times the salary and benefits as a comparable stateside assignment (Fuchsberg, 1992), and for high level executives, an expatriate assignment costs ten to fifteen times that of a stateside assignment (Lublin & Smith, 1994). Typical assignments last 2-3 years, and the family members usually accompany the employee, which increases maintenance costs (Guzzo et. al., 1994).

Adding to the high maintenance cost is the high failure rate of expatriate assignments. Early repatriation occurred in 73% of the respondents in a *Personnel Journal* (1996) survey, and 30-50% of expatriates who remain in their assignments are ineffective or unproductive (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Black et. al., 1991). These failures cost American organizations an estimated \$2.5 billion annually (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Lublin, 1992). Further, what costs are unknown and unknowable are the damaged business reputation or lost business opportunities because of an ill-placed assignment (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Dunbar & Katcher, 1990). Surprisingly, these expatriate failure rates have not changed since 1965, though the nature of doing business has changed dramatically since then (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985).<sup>1</sup>

Yet, despite the difficulties and high costs, expatriate assignments are expected to continue to rise (Guzzo et. al., 1994; Sebastian, 1995). However, while the globalization of business has arrived, the corresponding global mindset in management has not (Solomon, 1995). The success of an expatriate employee hinges on multi-dimensional factors (i.e., organizational and personal factors), but in the past, the primary selection criteria has been uni-dimensional: work skills or technical expertise, despite that this work-based trait alone has been an extremely poor indicator of expatriate success (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Black et. al., 1991; Caudron, 1991; Erez & Earley, 1993; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Solomon, 1994).

The American management mind set has been that "foreign assignment performance = domestic assignment performance"—despite that work-based skills are not the primary cause of expatriate failures. Indeed, the primary cause of expatriate failures is the lack of adequate cultural adjustment (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; Caudron, 1991; Solomon, 1994) which involves the "gradual development of familiarity, comfort, and proficiency regarding expected behaviors and the values and assumptions inherent in the new culture . . ." (Black & Mendenhall, 1990:118).

A survey in *Personnel Journal* (Solomon, 1994) noted that interpersonal skills as a primary selection criteria for expatriate employees came in a distant third, ranking only in

the 50th percentile, behind technical competence and professional experience, both ranking in the 90th percentile. Organizations are just slowly realizing that cross-cultural adaptation is a critical factor to expatriate success though the selection criteria hasn't yet changed (Black et. al., 1991; Foxman & Polsky, 1991; Flynn, 1995; Hogan & Goodson, 1990; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985).

Realizing that cross-cultural adaptation is important has led to a gradual increase in training: Only a decade ago, 10% of expatriate employees received cross-cultural training before foreign assignments compared to nearly 50% today (Frazee, 1996; Lublin, 1990; Sebastian, 1996). Many firms simply do not view expatriate training as wholly necessary, since the majority of assignments are temporary. And firms which do make adequate investment are demanding a quick payoff for their investment, fully expecting that expatriate employees will be fully productive within a few weeks of their arrival at the foreign worksite (Frazee, 1996).

Yet, the overall effectiveness of cross-cultural training is questionable. For example, a General Motors engineer found his training "horribly empty in helping us prepare for the personal side of the move" (Lublin, 1992: B1). In fact, the lack of family adjustment rather than the expatriate's work performance remains a critical issue in failed expatriate assignments (Lublin, 1992; Quintanilla, 1996). In general, expatriate training is considered too general and its effectiveness is usually not evaluated (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Tung, 1981), suggesting the need for entire families to receive more intensive, personalized training.

Yet, the topics are not the only problem in expatriate training. The timing between the training and the beginning of the assignment is too short, thus not allowing for proper absorption of material, not to mention the adequate time for in-depth material (Tung, 1981).

### **Issues in Expatriate Assignments**

The single largest issue in expatriate training is the cross-cultural adaptation to different economic, social, and political environment. In the workplace, the socialization process is critical to this adaptation to the work assignment, especially given the limited duration of expatriate assignments.

The ultimate goal of organizational socialization is a "fit" between the new organizational member and the organization. There are both content and process components involved in socialization. The content aspect of organizational socialization includes six global areas: performance proficiency, people (work relationships), politics language (jargon), goals and values, and history (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994).

In general, the process aspect of organizational socialization involves the transition from being a newcomer, outsider, or "other" to that of a tenured organizational member (Bullis, 1993; Chao et. al., 1994) which occurs in three general stages: entry or encounter, adjustment or assimilation, and exit (Bullis, 1993; Chao et. al., 1994; Reichers, 1987). The entry stage is the most difficult due to the process of trust development which must occur and which is essential and also complicated by diverse group members (Adler, 1991).

In general, Jackson, Stone, & Alvarez (1993:46) view the initial socialization process as a very "dynamic period during which the team attempts to assimilate newcomers and newcomers attempt to achieve accommodation from the team" which can have a lasting impact on future workplace interactions as well as individual careers, since this is the period

during which the newcomer ultimately develops their organizational role (Chao et. al., 1994). Though distinct stages can be identified, organizational socialization is not a standardized process (Clair, 1996), and the particular socialization boundaries are organizationally specific (Bullis, 1993; Smith & Turner, 1995).

Workplace socialization can be experienced from two standpoints: agent and target. While an expatriate might view that they are a primary agent of socialization with some level of status from an organizational standpoint, they are also the primary target of socialization from the standpoint of existing or tenured employees.

In general, people favor their in-groups over out-groups, even in spite of negative or contradictory in-group information (Erez & Earley, 1993; Schaller, 1992; Turner, 1987). In the in-group/out-group vernacular and in applying the concept of self-categorization (Hogg & Turner, 1987), socialization can be seen as the movement of a newcomer from out-group status toward in-group status where members are highly interdependent and reference to or membership in the group is critical to self-identity. Group members who are perceived as dissimilar (or an out-group member) even on minor attributes have lower satisfaction, less organizational loyalty, and higher turnover rates than in-group members (Bettenhausen, 1991; Jackson et. al., 1993; Smith, Olian, Simm, O'Bannon, & Scully, 1994). Even within the in-group, there are varying levels of in-group status with core and peripheral members (Noel, Wann, & Branscombe, 1995), but a certain level of similarity between newcomers and tenured organizational members and within the in-group itself must be maintained for organizational membership to be continued (Erez & Earley, 1993; Jackson, Brett, Sessa, Cooper, Julin, & Peyronnin, 1991; Noel et. al., 1995), and this is enhanced by cooperative relations (Turner, 1978).

Yet, the relationship between newcomers and tenured organizational members is reciprocal. The group itself can also be affected by out-group members, resulting in a work group that is less efficient and less flexible (Smith et. al., 1994). One attribute that makes the achievement of in-group status even more difficult is ethnicity (Adler, 1991; Jackson et. al., 1993), which has great ramifications for an American expatriate employee who is most likely the out-group member entering an ethnically homogeneous in-group. Thus, employees (and their psychological attributes) are not distributed randomly in an organization. In fact, over time due to in-group/out-group bias, on a macro-level organizations become increasingly homogeneous, but on a micro-level employees strive for uniqueness by maintaining their cultural identity (Adler, 1991; Jackson et. al., 1991), making socialization increasingly difficult for expatriate newcomers.

Jackson et. al. (1993) view the socialization process where norms are established as key to establishing team performance and stability. The high level of failed expatriate assignments due to either early repatriation or general ineffectiveness suggests that there are unmet or unrealistic work expectations that impede the rate of socialization.

Reichers (1987) notes that a faster rate of organizational adjustment is desirable both organizationally and individually. For the organization, job performance comes more quickly; for the individual, situational identity occurs which decreases anxiety that might impede performance (Reichers, 1987), though the socialization process favors the organization more than the individual (Clair, 1996). Thus, an earlier stage in the hiring process, the selection stage, provides a link to effective workplace socialization: selecting people for expatriate assignments who will organizationally adapt the most rapidly.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR SOLUTIONS

The factors that might increase the success of expatriate employees in their work assignments are a multi-dimensional combination of personal and organizational factors (Black et. al., 1991; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985, 1986). On the personal factor level, the literature is in agreement that the capacity to adapt to cross-cultural circumstances is critical to expatriate success.

However, this ability to adapt cross-culturally might not be so much a skill that can be taught in training as much as it is a cluster of psychological attributes or pre-dispositions which then manifest themselves in certain behaviors (HBR, 1995; Jackson et. al., 1991). In fact, the research is recognizing that personality traits—in addition to organizational (i.e., non-personal) factors such as pre-departure training, role clarity, and organizational support and rewards—may also be critical (Guzzo, et. al., 1994; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; HBR, 1995).

Thus, investigating these psychological attributes and developing a validated profile to determine if certain traits are predictors of expatriate success is critical. Although little has been done in this area, Black et. al. (1991) have recognized the lack of theories and models in understanding the cross-cultural adjustment process. Specifically, Mendenhall & Oddou (1985) have noted two basic problems with the field of expatriate selection and training: lack of understanding of the variables that contribute to cross-cultural adaptation as well as a lack of appropriate selection and training instruments.

In searching the literature for personality-related traits, there was a woeful lack of empirical support, even by the leaders in the field. However, the following sampling of traits was culled from some of the applied and theoretical literature published over the last 12 years. Despite the lack of theoretical base, the following are considered potential predictors of expatriate employee success:

- ability to get along with others (work-related and socially) (Caudron, 1991; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985);
- willingness to take risks (Flynn, 1995);
- verbal and non-verbal communication skills (Black et. al., 1992; Caudron, 1991; Flynn, 1995; Giacalone & Beard, 1994;
- Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Mendenhall, 1986);
- non-judgmental, dealing with isolation and alienation, respect for others, empathic, flexible attributions, open-mindedness (Black
- et. al., 1992; Black et. al., 1991; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985, 1986; Mendenhall & Wiley, 1994);
- tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty (Adler, 1991; Black et. al., 1991; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985, 1986; Mendenhall
- & Wiley, 1994);
- self-awareness (HBR, 1995);
- desire to change, open to change (Erez & Earley, 1993; HBR, 1995).

Many of these traits appear to overlap. For example, the ability to get along with others relates to communication; risk-taking relates to open-mindedness and dealing with uncertainty; being non-judgmental relates to being open-minded. Thus, what is necessary is

to find independent constructs that tap a majority of those traits listed above to determine their predictive ability for expatriate success.

## INSTRUMENTS

Regarding the field of international management and the high rate of expatriate failures, Kyi (1988:209) stated that "there are no deductively developed theories . . . and most so-called "theories" are experienced-based hunches or empirical generalizations. Well-integrated deductive theories with a central core concept . . . have not yet appeared." Thus, there is a critical need for more research to be done on the psychological factors that comprise cross-cultural adaptation as predictors for expatriate employees' success. A major contribution to this research would be an instrument that statistically taps these predictors.

Foxman & Polsky (1991:38) urge the selection of employees based on "intercultural effectiveness" and state that there are "research-based profiles that can assist in candidate assessment" but provide no details. Similarly, Black et. al., (1992:69) state that personnel managers have "a variety of tools at their disposal for assessing candidates," but they also fail to mention any specific tools other than general types: biographical data, standardized tests, work samples, and assessment centers.<sup>2</sup> Much of this discussion leads to the introduction of their own instrument, a self-report survey called F.A.S.T. which stands for Foreign Assignment Selection Test.

Though no reliability or validity data are presented, the test ostensibly taps six dimensions of managerial and cross cultural skills: cultural flexibility, skills and willingness to communicate, ability to develop social relationships, perceptual abilities, conflict-resolution skills, and leadership skills (Black et. al., 1992:70-71, 81). Rather than being personality-based like the two global constructs detailed earlier, this inventory is more skill-based. For example, the communication component relates primarily to the acquisition of foreign language skills necessary to communication with host nationals and the cultural flexibility component relates primarily to self-preservation such as coping and stress reduction skills. The F.A.S.T. survey holds promise in identifying skills that a particular expatriate employee might need specialized training in before departure, allowing for personalized programs. However, it is questionable whether cross-cultural adaptation can be learned as a skill or whether it is an innate personality trait (Dunbar & Katcher, 1990; HBR, 1995).

Two routes can be followed in identifying potential psychological traits that are predictors of successful expatriate employees: a test battery composed of scales or sub-scales of previously validated psychological tests or development of a specialized instrument.

### Test Battery

In developing a test battery, the goal is to find a few tests that tap a majority of the currently unvalidated predictors listed earlier. The identified test would be administered to expatriate candidates to determine their validity as predictors of expatriate success (i.e., completing the length and goals of an assignment). However, a search of *The Mental Measurements Yearbook* (1995), a battery that adequately covers the previously identified expatriate traits could not be identified.

### Development of a Specialized Instrument

Having a single selection instrument would be more efficient and less costly than administering an entire test battery. In developing a specialized instrument, the goal is the same as the test battery: to tap a majority of the currently unvalidated predictors listed earlier. In developing the scale, an attempt was made to tap each of the eleven traits identified in the literature at least twice, and these are noted in brackets following each item.

Directions: Using the scale below, please indicate the degree to which the following statements are true about you.

Scale:    1 = Never or Rarely                      3 = Occasionally                      5 = Always  
               2 = Seldom                                4 = Often

- \_\_\_\_\_ I prefer to share activities and events with other people, rather than doing things alone.  
 (R) [Taps: dealing with isolation/alienation]
- \_\_\_\_\_ In conversations, it is less important for me to get my point across than it is to find common ground.  
 [Taps: empathic communication]
- \_\_\_\_\_ Great familiarity with my surroundings is important for me to perform the task at hand well.  
 (R) [Taps: tolerance for ambiguity/uncertainty]
- \_\_\_\_\_ I can disagree with other people without becoming disagreeable.  
 [Taps: empathic communication, ability to get along with others, respect for others]
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other people know me better than I know myself.  
 (R) [Taps: self-awareness]
- \_\_\_\_\_ I can handle long periods of being alone better than other people.  
 [Taps: dealing with isolation/alienation]
- \_\_\_\_\_ I usually form categories during conversations and situations, so I know where people are coming from.  
 (R) [Taps: empathic communication, open-minded, non-judgmental, flexible attributions]
- \_\_\_\_\_ I believe that cultural norms affect behavior and attempt to adjust myself accordingly.  
 [Taps: open to change, respect for others, ability to get along with others]
- \_\_\_\_\_ I prefer to work with people who are like me in thoughts and actions.  
 (R) [Taps: open to change, willing to take risks]
- \_\_\_\_\_ Generally, I listen as much as I talk in a conversation.  
 [Taps: empathic communication, ability to get along with others]
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am a decisive person who is able to form opinions very quickly about people or situations and generally find them difficult to alter.  
 (R) [Taps: non-judgmental, open-minded, flexible attributions]
- \_\_\_\_\_ I usually acclimate quickly to new groups.  
 [Taps: open to change, ability to get along with others]
- \_\_\_\_\_ When my routines become altered, I tend to become anxious or frustrated.  
 (R) [Taps: self-awareness, open to change, tolerance for ambiguity/uncertainty]
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am usually among the first to try something new or different.  
 [Taps: open to change, willing to take risks]

There are a number of critical features to consider in instrument development, one of which is the type of scale: nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio. Each type of measurement has its pros and cons. The interval scale was chosen, so the respondents could have an opportunity to rank each statement with equal intervals on the scale. A Stapel Scale (with a uni-polar statement) was chosen, since developing a Semantic Differential Scale with precise polar opposite items is extremely difficult. All of the odd items are reverse scored— noted with an (R) — to avoid response bias.

While instrument development is not easy, validation is even more difficult and time-consuming. To validate this particular instrument, a longitudinal study, preferably within one organization, is necessary. Expatriate employees would take the instrument and later a determination can be made if those within a particular score range on the inventory outperformed (i.e., completed the assignment and met the goals of the assignment) those employees in other score ranges. Based on the statistical results, the instrument would then under go revision and/or expansion.

## CONCLUSIONS

The current ethnocentrically-based, global theories of work behavior are inadequate in dealing with the international sector (Erez & Earley, 1993). The entire world is now the marketplace of organizational America, and that expansion requires adaptation and change, making the agenda for organizational America even longer (Kanter, 1991). Expatriate employees and the organizations that they represent could benefit greatly with selection procedures that tap cross-cultural adaptation.

Currently, the international management field is in a “nascent, preparadigm state of development” (Black & Mendenhall, 1990:113), and the field will remain that way or even “inhibited” (Black et. al., 1991) without empirically-based studies. This statement is not meant as critical evaluation of the decades of work that have been done and render the now eclectic approach to international management a hodgepodge of uncreative, incoherent, useless trivia. There simply comes a point however, where the present work needs integration.<sup>3</sup> Without integration, the resulting disciplinary fragmentation can become inductive to the point of self-destruction, since no synthesis or pattern can emerge from the collected data. Kuhn (1970:15) writes in his landmark work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*: “In the absence of a paradigm or some candidate for a paradigm, all of the facts that could possibly pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant.”

Kuhn believes that without an integration of hypotheses, theories, and models, facts cannot be sorted out or applied strategically, and subsequently there is a risk that little value is contributed to the topic under study. Thus, as the field of international management grows, a critical point will be reached where the information must be integrated with empirical studies or it will become increasingly less useful to the topic under study.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the current literature is devoted to the topic of expatriate training (e.g., necessity, length, topics, targeted participants). And training is important for appropriately selected candidates. However, an earlier stage in the hiring process, the selection stage, provides a more effective link to workplace socialization: selecting people for expatriate assignments who will organizationally adapt the most rapidly.

Currently, human resource managers primarily use anecdotal information, rather than crucial financial information, in their expatriate selection procedures, creating a



“fundamentally flawed” process (Giacalone & Beard, 1994; Solomon, 1994:52). This current “tactical” method (i.e., deal with issues after they arise) of selecting expatriate employees has not worked for quite some time and is especially inappropriate in today’s global economy.

Thus, the expatriate employees selection methods need to become more strategic (Black et. al., 1992). One way to invoke more strategy in the selection process is to avoid the current tactical style of selection: finding a person for an international assignment *after* the assignment becomes available. To accomplish a reversal of the current trend, Black et. al., (1992:79) recommend a more strategic approach which will require greater planning organizationally. Specifically, the approach is an ongoing, comprehensive organizational analysis of global assignments where the expatriate candidate pool is developed in *advance* of the global assignments.

In short, the lack of proper selection of expatriate employees adds an unnecessary and potentially serious impeding variable in the global market. A continued lack of validated selection techniques will only foster continued egocentrism and ethnocentrism, failed assignments with billion dollar price tags, and further ill feelings and perceptions about organizational America—all traits that are contradictory for doing business in the new economic age. A strategically designed, empirically-validated selection program for expatriate employees in organizational America is long overdue, not only for the field of international management but also for doing business in the age of globalization.

## ENDNOTES

1. Organizational America can take solace in the fact that American expatriates are considered more “versatile” than expatriates from other countries due to the diversity in work and home life as well as educational training (Jones, 1997). As an aside, this causes one to wonder what the expatriate failure rate is for other countries.
2. Perhaps stating the availability of assessment tools is merely a gratuitous statement by the authors. References in various articles were traced to find specific profiles that many authors claim exist but no detailed information could be found. Given the numerous number of instruments and tests available on the market, it might be an intuitive conclusion that such tests exist. However, neither the specific tests were listed nor was there any indication that a test if listed might actually be a validated predictor for expatriates.
3. Credit is due to researchers Erez & Earley as well as Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou for attempting to formulate theories and models of international management. However, the field continues to lack empirical studies that validate these theories and models. Certainly, validation is a long and often tedious process, especially given the nature of idiosyncratic international assignments. However, sooner or later, it must be done if the field is to continue to grow theoretically!
4. The principles concerning paradigms expounded in Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) must be used rather loosely when applied to the other areas, since—by Kuhn’s own admission—his book deals primarily with the biological and physical sciences (Kuhn, 1970:ix). Yet, despite the physical science orientation of Kuhn’s scientific revolution model, it is still useful when applied to the other disciplines—not so

much as a precise model in the strictest sense of scientific rigor—but as a productive heuristic metaphor which can assist in tracing the development of ideas within a given field.

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