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The Expatriate Manager in a University in the United Arab Emirates: The Dynamics of Workplace Diversity

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Abstract

Today many managers around the world are making the specific career choice to engage in international mobility. The purpose of this paper is to document and analyse the case of a private higher education institution in the United Arab Emirates, which showcases the trend towards increasing international mobility in management careers in an academic environment. Intense competition in the higher education market and accreditation pressures markets have encouraged many universities to look beyond their nation's borders for managers. This presents a complex set of academic and managerial challenges. A common response is to employ managers with impressive international track records. That policy has had mixed results. The paper contends that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach when it comes to the preference for employing managers with an international track record is not always a guarantee of success in an Arab environment, as the study suggests that extensive support needs to be given to expatriate managers. The findings of this study contribute to the body of knowledge in the cross-cultural management field as it pertains to self-directed expatriates.

Keywords: expatriate managers, culture, challenges, adjustment

1. Introduction

Given global economic and employment uncertainty, an increasing number of professionals are taking the opportunity to pursue an international career (Richardsson & Zikic, 2007). This may seem on the surface like a glamorous example of globalization in action, but what happens in practice when different work cultures meet?

Little attention appears to have been paid to international training and management development for expatriates, yet this is vital for the success of any organization (Ramalu et al, 2012). A better understanding is needed of the unique experiences of expatriate managers internationally when adjusting to the cross-cultural challenges affecting their careers. In order to succeed in a globally competitive environment, organizations need to effectively train expatriates in international capabilities, including fluency in foreign languages and in the ability to adapt to different cultures. This paper focuses on ways to improve and nurture knowledge acquisition for expatriate managers, particularly those in higher education institutions in Gulf Arab countries.

In parallel with this, attention needs to be paid to how can we improve local-expatriate work relations in the Arab Gulf states. This will become a pressing question, as the state-sanctioned localization policies in the Gulf countries, such as Emiratisation in the UAE, are leading to increasing numbers of local Arabs working alongside expatriate employees (Alserhan et al., 2010). In order to manage this effectively, we need a better understanding of the dynamics of diversity in the Gulf Arab workplace.

2. Literature Review

In this study, expatriates are identified as those who leave their home country, under assignment, for business purposes, with the intent of eventual return (Aycan & Kanungo, 1997). Tungli and Peiperl (2009) analysed the main reasons organizations fill management positions with expatriates in Germany, the UK, Japan and the US, finding that setting up a new operation, filling skill gaps and developing international management skills to be the most important reasons organizations employ expatriates.

2.1. Cultural Intelligence

Research on the factors that promote effectiveness of expatriates in their role as managers has established the importance of cultural intelligence (Ang et al., 2007). Cultural intelligence refers to how an individual successfully adapts to new cultures (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2007), and has its foundation in Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1993).

Cultural intelligence is a multidimensional construct consist of meta-cognitive (knowledge that leads to deep information-processing), cognitive, motivational, and behavioural components (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ng & Earley, 2006). However, cultural intelligence is distinct from other forms of non-academic intelligence, such as, for example, emotional intelligence, in that it requires the ability to adapt and change relatively smoothly from one cultural environment to another (Earley & Ang, 2003; Brislin, Worthley, & MacNab, 2006; Ang et al., 2007).

Cultural sensitivity, a different facet of cultural intelligence, has been defined as having a positive attitude towards appreciating cultural differences (Ang et al., 2006), and is viewed as central to promoting intercultural communication (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Claus et al., 2011). Ultimately, this helps with adjustment and also job performance. Furthermore, the positive perception of an expatriate about cultural differences, especially if they lead to an adjustment in certain facets of their behaviour, might foster better job performance (Mol et al., 2005; Shin et al., 2007).

Another aspect of cultural intelligence is self-efficacy. The concept of self-efficacy explains how individuals' perceptions about their ability to achieve certain tasks motivate them to achieve their personal and career objectives. It stands to reason that expatriate managers with low self-efficacy may exhibit poor performance (Claus et al., 2011), whereas expatriates who exhibit high self-efficacy usually have better performance (Osman-Gani & Rockstuhl, 2008).

2.2. Adjustment

Closely related to cultural intelligence is adjustment. This has been defined in terms of subjective well-being (Campbell, 1981) or unhappy feelings (Maruyama, 1992; Munton and West, 1995). Black (1988) defined adjustment as being related to acceptance of the new status quo, categorizing adjustment as being related to work (comfort with the job), general (comfort with non-work factors such as food, language etc.), and interaction (interaction between expatriates and host country nationals).

Researchers such as Haslberger, Brewster, and Hippler (2013; 2014), believe people adjust in three dimensions, namely cognitive (knowledge and understanding), affective (feelings) and behavioural (actions). Expatriate adjustment is positively related to job performance (Lee & Sukoco, 2010; Mol et al., 2005).

Expatriates can easily adjust to different systems, given the right support. There are challenges in the work environment, but often it is an environment that is relatively familiar, so adjustment may be easier compared to other, non-work spheres, such as social relations and family relationships (Haslberger & Brewster, 2008; Hyslop, 2012).

An area that should not be overlooked when it comes to cultural adjustment is that of language (Masgoret & Ward, 2006), although results are inconclusive as to its actual effect (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Selmer, 2006). More recent research is beginning to examine the complex role of language in business-related interactions (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2014; Tenzer, Pudenko, & Harzing, 2014).

Knouse (2009) found that individual expatriates use the diversity values of the organization they work for as a barometer to determine how such organizational values reflect their personal values. Globalization has brought the benefits of diversity to many organizations (Jackson et al, 2003; Von Bergen et al., 2005; Richard et al, 2007), though these are sometimes countermanded by the challenges of adjusting to managing diverse teams, with different team members having different approaches to the tasks at hand (Adler, 2008; Caliguiri & Colakoglu, 2007; Miliken & Martins, 1996; Takeuchi et al., 2005; Turner & Crisp, 2010).

To further our understanding of the expatriate work experience, subsequent research, such as that conducted by Templer et al. (2005) emphasised the importance of realistic job expectations among expatriates. Others, such as Haines et al. (2008), using Ryan and Deci's (2000) work on motivation, highlighted the important distinction between extrinsic (satisfaction, such as financial reward, being separated from work) and intrinsic (being satisfied with the work itself) motivations in understanding how expatriates adjust to the work experience. Although both types of motivation are important, Haines et al found those who showed higher levels of intrinsic motivation appeared more enthusiastic than those motivated by more extrinsic concerns.

2.3. The Arab Influence

'Wasta', a system of social relationships which has been compared with networking and mentoring (Tlairs & Kausar, 2011), is of significance in the career advancement in the Middle East. It is commonly described in terms of the ability of individuals to influence others through powerful social contacts, with those contacts usually being members of the same group or tribe (Barnet et al, 2013; Tucker & Buckton-Tucker, 2016).

It is deeply rooted in Middle Eastern societies and is common in searching for employment and in gaining university admission, amongst any other things. 'Wasta' is an Arabic term which obliges those within the group to provide support to others within the group. One is said to 'have wasta' when assistance is granted.

In an employment context, while 'wasta' can be useful for those who might be unsuccessful when matters are decided based on merit, it can create issues for expatriates, particularly those in management.

Arab tradition also values those who adopt a paternalistic approach to management. This has meant that Western managers have often fused elements of paternalism with their management style. However, with Western influence now permeating organizational operations, many Arab managers feel the need to integrate Western values into their management

style. This gives the appearance of a hybrid style, with compromise happening on all fronts, suggesting that dialectic theory (Cunha & Cunha, 2004) or the confluence of two contrasting viewpoints, comes into play.

2.4. Education

Forstenlechner et al. (2011), in their study on the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) demographic imbalance, believed the educational system to be generally weak. They believe this to have had spill-over effects in employment, especially in the private sector, where a number of positions at the management and executive level are more believed to have been recently reserved for expatriates.

In recent years, however, the GCC has placed great emphasis on improving educational outcomes and has not only succeeded in attracting a number of international higher education institutions, in addition to embarking on ambitious reforms in national institutions. A large number of western and/or western-trained faculty and management have also. This is part of the region's efforts to transform itself into a knowledge-based economy. However, this has been accompanied by a sometimes-acrimonious debate over the perceived overshadowing as Arabic as the medium of instruction/work in education.

2.5. Time

Time, though related to adjustment, has often been disregarded in research on expatriates and how they adjust to working abroad (see, for example, Bedeian, 1996; Kelly & McGrath, 1998). However, as noted by Hippler et al. (2005), as are among the most expensive employees an organization employs, taking account of the time needed for them to adjust is crucial towards ensuring their success in any given position, including management.

Adjustment invariably occurs over time (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991), as expatriates become more used to their surroundings and develop coping strategies. Mitchell and James (2001) identify five variables that describe what occurs over time: lag (how long it takes to see the effect of something), durations (different stages of adjustment have different durations), rate of change (adjustment may change over time), dynamic relationships (relationships are not static and change in nature and duration over time) and reciprocal causation (cause and effect can sometimes be interchangeable).

3. Background context

The university in question is a private one located in Dubai, based on a North American curriculum model. The student population comprises over one hundred different nationalities and the staff population over thirty different nationalities. The expatriates and expatriate managers at this institution can be called self-directed, in that they are not assigned by a parent company or institution to work overseas; rather, it is a personal choice. Contracts are usually for either two or three years, with three years being more common for those who are concerned mainly with academics.

4. Methodology

This study is a case study of how self-directed expatriate managers in a private higher education institution view their experiences and how the organizational setting may be affected as a result. Accordingly, the research questions guiding this study were:

- How do people of different nationalities view their circumstances?
- Is cross-cultural training necessary, and what are the perceived benefits of training?
- How was the organizational setting changed / sustained by the actions and understandings of expatriate managers?

This examines the case of a private university in the UAE over a two-year period, 2013-2015. The methodological approach was ethnographic, as the author sought to understand the relationship between expatriate managers' understandings and actions and how the organizational setting was affected as a result (Denzin, 1997; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Neal, 2010).

A case study, employing qualitative methodology, was used to develop a holistic understanding of the key issues and challenges in expatriate management. This study used purposive sampling to select participants (AlMazrouei & Pech, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty expatriate managers, ten of whom were academic managers and ten managers in non-academic areas, such as finance and HR. Each manager was interviewed three times. For the purposes of this study, expatriate managers were understood as individuals who were living outside of their home country on a temporary basis, for more than one year but less than ten years. As the institution in question is relatively small, anonymity was sought after and assured.

As the research questions considered how expatriate managers interacted with other colleagues, the overarching aim was to gain what *verstehen*, or understanding (Weber, 1968) Weber (1968), which means that how participants interpreted their situation was central to the study. The interviews explored the motivation behind the decision to take an overseas position, the actual experience of taking the position, and reflections of that experience. Analysis was presented to the participants for their feedback, with the analysis itself involving an iterative process, exploring emerging themes among the interview scripts.

4.1. Findings and Discussion

Over the course of this study, five themes emerged, namely: permanence v transience, wasta networks, risk, challenges in managing expatriates and cross-cultural training. Each of these is discussed below.

4.1.1. Permanence Vs Transience

John, an academic manager, stressed the transience of expatriate workers as being a key feature of expatriate life that not only influenced the nature of expatriate-local relationships, but also strategic planning and operations:

"Sometimes it seems like a case of 'here today, gone tomorrow'. We make plans and the person who is working on a project leaves, for whatever reason – could be family reasons, non-renewal of contract, and then we are back to the drawing board. It's how things are, but it makes it difficult to plan for the long-term. Even for us as managers, or especially for us as managers, we might not be here long-term either, so, whenever someone new comes in, things change."

Such sentiments were echoed by Lily, an operational manager:

"As soon as I get someone trained, it seems they leave. Complex systems can take a long time to master, and investing time in someone who is most likely not going to be there for too many years is frustrating, to say the least. That's how things are in the Gulf, but it also explains why it's one step forward, two steps back, a lot of the time."

The contrast in employment contracts between expatriates and locals, though explained by all as being due to the transience of the expatriate workforce, was nonetheless resented by over half of those interviewed.

4.1.2. Wasta Networks

Every participant interviewed mentioned wasta, or influence through networks of family and friends. However, a key difference emerged between how it was viewed by Arab and Western expatriate managers, with the former viewing it as beneficial, whilst the latter group viewed it more in terms of nepotism, as stated by Nick, an operational manager:

"The only way to get things done here is through wasta. That's not a criticism, it's an observation, as it's not only this university, but every university in the region. I've seen all kinds of people bypass procedure to get things happening. I've tried to do things professionally, but maybe it's got to be a case of 'if you can't beat them, join them!' However, you have to be from the region to benefit from this. There's a complex network of relationships you only get to know about by accident, when you've been here for a long time. It's amazing who's related to whom."

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"Wasta is a complex thing, not as easily defined as many non-Arabs think it is. It is a system that works, when it helps to get to the heart of the matter. Of course, it can be misused, and indeed it is often misused, but that's not how it's supposed to operate. At its best, it is a beneficial thing. I use it, as does almost everyone here; it's just how things are done."

Wasta, it seems, is here to stay. It is pervasive, yet is also a reality, and is used at all levels. At the university in this case study, it seems to be primarily used to gain a position or promotion, circumventing normal procedure. In this study, expatriate managers from non-Arab countries used wasta far less often than Arab expatriate managers.

Resentment stemmed primarily for the use of wasta to parachute people into senior positions, as this was something both Arab and non-Arab expatriate managers mentioned during the interview process. Mohsin, an academic manager, explains as follows:

"It's not that we are against the use of wasta; it's just that there are some people who are closely related by blood to those at the top who keep getting promoted to cushy positions for which they are not qualified. They don't perform, yet they are still here, and, worse, they tell the rest of us what to do, as they know we aren't as secure in our jobs as they are. There are some very good people here who will never get a chance to show what they can do to help this university, and there are others who are very good managers who have a hard time being undermined by these incompetent guys. This makes it difficult to move things forward in the university sometimes."

Though wasta was discussed by all the participants, what emerged was that non-Arab expatriate managers were far more likely to speak up than their Arab counterparts in order to seek improvements in the administrative system, perhaps because of a perceived lesser need to keep their jobs.

4.1.3. Risk

All of the participants in this case study were acutely aware of the risk involved in pursuing an international career, which was perhaps even more keenly felt amongst the academic managers in the group. They accepted that there were advantages, such as the challenge involved and the sense of accomplishment in successfully overcoming the challenges, and also recognised the disadvantages, with job security being at the top of this list. As Mohamed, an academic manager, says:

"Yes, the money here is better. That's the number one reason most people come to the Gulf, let's face it. It seems golden, the expat lifestyle, sun and sand, but the reality is very different for most people. We work 70-80 hours per week on a regular basis, so we don't have time to enjoy the lifestyle. Most of my weekends are spent working, and my family complains a lot about this. I feel guilty, as I miss out on so many things with the kids. However, I have no choice, because we all know that contracts can be cancelled in seconds, because there's no job security. So, we have to work as hard as we can for as long as we can."

Those with spouses/partners also spoke of the potential for conflict if the spouse/partner could not find a meaningful role, or, for those who travelled to the UAE on their own, the disadvantages involved in separation from the family, such as Mark, an operational manager:

"Being separated from family is tough. At first, let's be honest, there are positives to not being answerable to someone on a daily basis, but you quickly realise that it's a lonely existence. You do it for mainly financial reasons, to secure your children's education and future, but you find you don't have that support network you took for granted."

This suggests that family is something organizations need to pay more attention to in the Middle Eastern context, where many expatriates are separated from family. Expatriates may have a more positive experience if they have the support network that family provides, especially when there is a significant difference in work and social culture between the home and host countries.

The interviews also suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the risks perceived by expatriates that their work stint abroad won't be valued when they eventually move back home. As Claire, an operational manager, says:

"Personally, despite the problems, I'm happy here. However, no attention is paid to our professional development, and that ultimately means that I can't stay here for longer than a couple of years. I'm not an Emirati citizen, and, just like everyone else, have no hope of becoming one, so I'll need to return home to continue to get ahead in my career. If I spend too long here, that won't happen, and that's a shame, because it means that good people won't stay for long. Incompetent people, on the other hand, will stay here for as long as they can, because this will be the best job they'll ever have."

It seems, therefore, that the university in question, and perhaps organizations in the UAE in general, need to take into account the fact that they could do more to professionally develop their employees, to keep them abreast of current developments in the field. This would encourage many to stay longer, thus making organizational systems more sustainable as a result.

4.1.4. Challenges in managing expatriates

Integrating expatriate managers into the university has seen very mixed results, perhaps because HR has not considered the areas that need to be addressed in order for this endeavour to be successful. Normally, HR should be proactive and anticipate any issues that may occur, dealing with them before they spiral out of control. However, this has not happened, and Thomas, an academic manager, explains the consequences:

"I come from a Western academic background, and, until coming to this university, spent all my life in the West, doing well in my career. I reached the stage where I wanted a challenge, and thought this would be it, as I could help the university become more international and do something meaningful. Well, it's certainly been a challenge, but in different ways! The system here is not international, no matter what people say, and that's what seems to be the case in all universities in the region. Work practices are so different. The difference between what is said and what is done is incredible. Nobody from HR gives us the support or training we need. And then they wonder why there's a high turnover?"

This raises an interesting point, as, despite the fact that the university is seeking to attract more Western expatriate managers, their numbers remain small, and, of those who are at the university, most leave after a few years. Perhaps HR needs to consider how to at least provide initial support to expatriate managers, to help them to overcome issues in a work culture that is different to their own.

Yassin, an operations manager, adds that work culture practices need to be more clearly explained:

"In every country, there are labour laws that say how many hours a week someone is supposed to work. However, the reality is that, in Dubai in particular, people are expected to work 24/7. If you complain, you're out. Jobs aren't as easy to come by these days, with lots of places not hiring. If people knew before they got here what the reality is like, then they would be able to make an informed decision. They also need training programs when they get here."

Though all participants agree that one of the biggest advantages in their current position is the diversity they encounter within their teams, they also point out that it needs to be carefully managed. As Ian, an academic manager, surmises:

"We're trying to standardize, and, to a large extent, we've been successful. Yet, the process has been incredibly painful, more so than in other countries, perhaps, because, when you raise standards, you encounter a lot of resistance from people who don't see why they should do things any different to how they've always done them."

This is perhaps a contradiction when it comes to diversity, in that it can lead to greater resentment of change that is intended to improve standards and efficiency. This would be a challenge for any manager, but, perhaps even more so for a manager who is expatriate. What this means in practice is that there can be a conflict between diversity and standardisation, which organizations need to be aware of and take steps to minimise, by perhaps facilitating intercultural communication and setting clear performance management goals. Once expectations are clear to all, individual performance can become aligned with institutional performance. This would harness the many benefits that all participants acknowledge diversity to provide.

4.1.5. Cross-Cultural Training

Cross-cultural training was felt by all participants, both Arab and non-Arab, to be an area where the institution could do more. As Laila, an academic manager, states:

“Emirati culture is very different to that other cultures, though we can say every culture is different. But because in this country the vast majority of people who live and work here are expats, we need training in order to be able to understand not only Emirati culture, but a more international work abroad culture too.”

Kevin, an operational manager, suggests that families be included in cultural training:

“Why do organizations forget about the families? Spouses in particular need help to adapt to the culture. With children, it’s a little different, as they tend to adapt well in school, but there should be an appreciation that whole families often make the move to be here, and they need support.”

That is a point worth mentioning, as spouses in particular do not have the benefit of interactions that their manager partner or children do. This would potentially help work performance of managers, and contribute to longevity of stay, thus also potentially benefitting the institution financially.

Hussain, an academic manager, reiterates the benefits of cross-cultural training with regards to the financial performance of an organization:

“Expats are expensive to hire – visa, travel, accommodation, school fees – all of this adds up to a lot of money.

Therefore, it should be in the university’s interest to keep them here as long as possible, but they need to be supported if that is to happen. I’ve seen many people come and go here during my time, and I can’t help feeling that a lot of them would have stayed for longer if they had been given the cultural training they needed in the first place. Sometimes I think organizations in the entire area are very short-sighted when it comes to the little things that can make a big difference.”

This suggests that cross-cultural training is a necessary part of successful expatriate management. However, it also appears that, although there are some similarities, there is no one-size-fits-all template, as each organization is unique.

5. Recommendations

Given that this study is based solely on the experiences of expatriate managers at one private higher education institution, the findings presented here may not apply to public institutions. Similarly, this paper has reported that although there are similarities in how expatriate managers experience an international career in universities, there are some differences. It may be that managers pursuing an international career in higher education institutions in other countries have different experiences to those reported here. Whereas the paper focuses on expatriates in management, it may be that expatriates in faculty positions may experience different relationships with their home and host countries. Moreover, it may be useful to explore the relationships of other self-directed expatriates such as managers in other fields (outside academia) and corporate executives. Thus, exploration of other organizations is important in order to determine the extent to which the findings reported here apply to other work environments.

6. Conclusion

This paper reflects the experiences of a group of expatriate managers in an academic environment, who have made a personal choice to embark on an international career. It is clear that moving to another country has a number of potentially far-reaching implications for both the individuals and the institution concerned.

Challenges encounters are primarily concerned with the elements of risk and lack of permanence. This uncertainty, although accepted by all concerned, is somewhat counterbalanced by the positive elements involved, which include diversity and internationalisation.

Expatriate managers can certainly benefit an institution and be a tremendous asset, though there also needs to be a general understanding that there are risks that need to be managed. This calls for HR departments to develop strategies to help expatriates acculturate and thereby achieve optimum performance in their work. This case study sheds light on the realities of what it means in practice both for individuals and organizations to have diversity in the workplace in the United Arab Emirates. It can help inform organizational strategy, so that challenges can be successfully overcome and organizational strategy can become more strategic. More expatriates are choosing to work overseas, so this also reflects a need to recognize that the trend for self-directed expatriates, as opposed to assigned expatriates, is set to continue. Organizations will need to explore ways in which this segment of the work population can be supported, in order to become more efficient.

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