ELABORATING THE NEED OF CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING FOR WORKING IN CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Adopting a qualitative, in-depth interview approach, this study aims to explore factors which can best address the need of cross-cultural training for effectively working overseas. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews from 15 Taiwanese expatriate managers. The results yield three themes found to be critical factors which can demonstrate that cross-cultural training is worth the investment by multinational corporations. This study makes a contribution to the international human resource management on addressing the importance and need of cross-cultural training for the effectiveness of expatriate managers by adding the perspectives of non-Western expatriate managers. The results recommend that multinational corporations should incorporate the development of cultural awareness, interpersonal communication skills, and English ability into cross-cultural training programs both in the stages of pre-departure and pos-arrival.

Keywords: Expatriate manager, Cross-cultural training, Cross-cultural competence, Cross-cultural adjustment, multinational corporations

INTRODUCTION

The rise and competition of ever-increasingly global economy has multiplied the number of expatriates across the world, creating the need for multinational corporations (MNCs) to equip their expatriates with cross-cultural competence. However, the poor performance of expatriate managers continued to be a matter for MNCs (Dowling and Welch, 2005). Research in the field has indicated

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that cultural difference, language barrier, and the inability to adapt to local culture are major reasons for expatriate failure (Johnson, Lenartowicz, and Apud, 2006; Dowling and Welch, 2005). These factors leading to expatriate ineffectiveness are all relevant to lack of cross-cultural competence. As a result, the need for expatriates to learn and to acquire competence for effective cross-cultural interactions has become imperative. In response to these conditions, many MNCs implement CCT to facilitate expatriate effectiveness. While the number of MNCs implementing CCT is on the rise (Littrell and Salas, 2005), some MNCs still doubt its effectiveness and usefulness (Tung, 1981; Mendenhall& Oddou, 1985; Oman-Gani, 2000) and, as a result, choose not to provide it (Black and Mendenhall, 2007). According to Black and Mendenhall (2007), their main reason for doubting the effectiveness of CCT is that they assume that a good manager at home can be a good manager anywhere in the world. On the other hand, scholars advocating the importance or effectiveness of CCT do not offer adequate empirical evidence to support their claims (Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Selmer, 2001; Litertrell and Salas, 2005). These factors widen the gap in the issue of whether CCT is worth the investment between MNCs and academics.

To close the gap, therefore, this study aims to empirically identify factors which can best demonstrate the need of CCT to expatriate effectiveness from examining the perspectives and experiences of expatriate mangers through three dimensions relevant to expatriate effectiveness: challenges of cross-cultural interactions, competence essential to effectively work in cross-cultural settings and the effectiveness of CCT. Additionally, this study argues that competence, particularly, cross-cultural competence are not acquired overnight, and thus by indentifying various factors influencing expatriate effectiveness, this study can offer suggestions for MNCs to develop some specific cross-cultural training programs appropriate to effectively enhance expatriates' cross-cultural competence and their success.

Furthermore, echoing with calls from Oman-Gani and Rockstuhl(2009) for more qualitative studies exploring CCT from Asian expatriates, this study adopted a qualitative research approach with expatriate managers from Taiwan.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. *Challenges of cross-cultural interactions*

Because the core of an international assignment lies in the process of working and living in culturally different environment, the challenges or stressor of cross-cultural interaction must be understood.

Cultural difference has been indentified to be one of the major factor contributing to failures of expatriate assignments or business abroad (Johnson et al., 2006; Dowling and Welch, 2005). Culture is the ways we live. It is a multi-construct of values, belief, language, and regulations. It directs how we think, love, and behave. Thus, "one cannot know about life in another culture unless one has experienced" (Brandl & Neyer, 2009, p.348). Similarly, Zander and Bulter (2010) consider that "culture is viewed as a critical localization force contributing to the complex of doing business across national borders" (p. 258). Many expatriates encounter difficulties in working abroad because their previously established behaviors do not work in a culturally different context which is uncertain to them (Shin, Morgeson and Campion, 2007). Stock and Genisyürek (2012) further mentioned that cross-cultural uncertainty is one of the major issues for expatriate assignments, particularly, differences in general culture, economic, political, and technological situations in host country affect expatriate's work. Thus, the uncertainty associated with complex working situations often defines overseas assignments (Stock and Genisyürek, 2012). As Hajro and Pudelko(2010) contend that expatriate managers without ability to simultaneously work with different cultural people together with an inability to adjust to different cultures are among the major reasons of failure. Therefore, expatriates and MNCs should pay more attention to cultural differences and specific host country values and norms (Malek and Budhwar, 2013).

In addition to culture difference in general, language is another critical issue of cross-cultural challenges. "Language differences create barriers to intercultural communication in foreign subsidiaries" (Peltokorpi, 2010, p.158). Brett, Behfar and Kern (2006) demonstrate that trouble with language fluency and accents is a main cultural barrier for people who work in culturally diverse settings. Some studies point out that expatriates with low proficiency in host country language have negative impact on cross-cultural adjustment (Peltokorpi, 2008; Selmer, 2006). Others argue that insufficient proficiency in local language influences job satisfaction (Parker and McEvoy, 1993). In overseas assignments, expatriates often engage in cross-cultural communication. In this regard, an expatriate manager must accurately convey what he/she really wants to say and exactly interprets what he/she receives in order to achieve an effective cross-cultural communication. Steer et al. (as

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cited in Zander, Mockaitis, and Butler, 2012, p. 594) conclude that "mastering intercultural communications by listening for contextual message behind content messages is one of main leadership challenges for leaders of multicultural teams." Zander et al. (2012) further argue that language issue has started to received attention in global business and that leaders need to acquire certain competences to be able to work effectively.

Adjustment is another challenge of expatriates. Cross-cultural adjustment "refers to the degree of psychological comfort which one feels in a foreign environment" (Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2009, p.279). Research has asserted that cross-cultural adjustment is a challenging and difficult process (Caligiuri, 2000). It involves adjustment to work, to interacting with host nations, and to general living conditions abroad. The complexity and multi-facets in nature of adjustment process create challenges for expatriates and often lead to their premature return. Research has provided evidence suggesting that the inability to adapt to local culture is one of main reasons for expatriate failure (e.g. Caligiuri, 2000; Briscoe and Schuler, 2004). Pomeroy (2006) further stressed that due to the lack of the ability to adjust to different aspects of local culture, 51% of expatriates suffered problems in performing in the host country. The challenging and importance of cross-cultural adjustment associated with its effect on expatriate performance, thus, knowledge or competence about how to deal with expatriate adjustment or adaptation is critical for expatriates and their organizations.

B. Competence imperative to effectively work in cross-cultural context

Several studies have examined competences related to expatriates' effectiveness in cross-cultural context. Deng and Gibson (2009) interviewed 32 Western expatriate managers and 19 local Chinese managers working in Australian subsidiaries in China and found that expatriate managers' cultural intelligence plays an importance role in their effectiveness. Deng and Gibson (2009) identified that cultural awareness, motivational cultural adaptation, adaptive behavior, and effective cross-cultural communication are four key cultural intelligence abilities that facilitate expatriate managers cope with cultural differences. Similarly, Malek and Budhwar (2013) found that expatriates' cultural intelligence has a direct positive influence on general, interaction and work adjustment, and that successful interaction and well adjustment will in turn positively influence both task and contextual performance. In a similar study, Huff, Song and Gresch (2014) investigating 154 expatriates in Japan reached the same conclusion as Malek and Budhwar (2013), finding that

motivational cultural intelligence is positively related to expatriate general, interaction and work adjustment.

Caligiuri and Tarique (2012) pointed out that three cross-cultural competencies – reduced ethnocentrism or valuing cultural difference, cultural flexibility or adaptation, and tolerance of ambiguity – are unique to global leadership effectiveness. According to Caligiuri and Tarique (2012), these three competencies were found to be predictors of expatriate performance. In their study of in search of global leadership, Mendenhall and Bird (2013, p.171) contended that"interpersonal skills of communication and the creation and maintenance of trust across multiple relationship" must be profoundly intercultural to enhance the awareness and sensitivity of boundary-spanning leaders (such as expatriate managers) to effectively working across cultures. Similarly, Chen and Starosta (1996) assert that intercultural communication competence is needed to effectively perform assignments overseas. Intercultural communication competence is the effectiveness of skills, attitudes, or traits for establishing and maintaining successful cross-cultural interactions, including cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity and cultural adroitness (Chaisrakeo and Speece, 2004; Chen and Starosta, 1996).

C. *Effectiveness of CCT*

Black and Mendenhall (1990) conducted first literature review of studies that empirically evaluated the effectiveness of cross-cultural training program. Of the 29 studies, 19 explored the relationship between CCT and skills related to foster intercultural relationship, and each of these 19 studies found that CCT positively influenced the development of cross-cultural skills. In addition, a total of 9 studies examined the relationship between CCT and adjustment. All 9 studies found a positive relationship between CCT and adjustment. Moreover, fifteen of 29 studies investigated the influence of CCT on performance, and 11 of these 15 studies indicated a significant relationship between CCT and performance. Black and Mendenhall (1990) concluded that CCT has a positive impact on the development of cross-cultural skills, on cross-cultural adjustment, and on job performance in cross-cultural context.

Another important study offering evidence that supports the effectiveness of CCT was conducted by Morris and Robie (2001). Using a meta-analysis, Morris and Robie (2001) identified 41 empirical studies available in the literature to examine the effect of CCT on expatriate performance and adjustment. The results of their study show that there are significant positive

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relationships between CCT and expatriate performance and between CCT and expatriate adjustment. More recently, Littrell and Salas (2005) reviewing the past 25 years of CCT research suggest that "CCT is an effective tool for facilitating expatriate success" (p.314).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative in-depth interview was chosen as the method of data collection in the present study for two main reasons: (1) Because this study aims to indentify factors which can best justify and explain the need of CCT for working in cross-cultural settings by looking into the process and the experiences of expatriate managers in international assignments and (2) because the goals of this study require that the researcher not only hears from the participants themselves, listen to their stories about the process, interaction, challenges, and difficulties they encountered in international assignments, but also understand what competencies or strategies they need in order to overcome the challenges or difficulties they faced as well as explore how CCT facilitate their effectiveness. The qualitative in-depth interview approach has been widely recognized as an effective tool that helps participants to explain and share experience and stories about an action, a process, or an interaction as much as possible. Additionally, the open-ended questions in the process of interviews may help the researcher to explore broader and deeper understanding of the need of CCT for the effectiveness of expatriate mangers.

A. Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to generate sample. Two selection criteria were applied to enhance the solidness and thoroughness of the study:

1. The participants must have experience in international assignments and must have resided in the host country for at least two years for their rich experiences of working overseas may contribute insights into what enhances expatriate effectiveness.

2. The participants must be provided with cross-cultural training programs, either pre-departure or post-arrival.

Therefore, 15 expatriates working for MNCs were recruited. They were in the middle and upper management positions. Three out of 15 participants currently relocate in Malaysia and 12 are former expatriate managers, who relocated in United States, Germany, Japan, Singapore, South

Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and China. They were male and Taiwanese with 2-30 years of experience in international assignments.

B. Data Collection

Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews and CCT documents found to be relevant. To best understand and elicit the views, opinions, and attitudes regarding the implementation and need of CCT to expatriate effectiveness, the interview questions were designed to answer three specific issues: (1) challenges of cross-cultural interactions; (2) the experience of CCT; (3) cross-cultural competence. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed *verbatim*. In addition, demographic information was provided by each participant before the interview. The interview transcript was sent via email to each participant for corrections and verification.

FINDINGS

Data analysis generated three main themes indentified as key factors underlining the need of CCT for effectively working in a cross-cultural context: (1) stressors of cross-cultural interactions, (2) learning competence necessary for cross-cultural effectiveness, and (3) the effect of training. Each of these three main themes was carefully and briefly depicted below.

A. Stressors of cross-cultural interactions

Cultural difference, cross-cultural adjustment, and different language system were found to be main stressors or challenges for expatriates while working in a culturally different setting.

1). Different work behavior, work attitudes, and regulations

All participates admitted that cultural differences complicated their work and managing their local staff. Generally, work behavior/attitudes of local staff and local regulations were perceived as the most pervasive stressors while working in cross-cultural settings. Those relocated to Southeast Asia and Western countries indicated that the work habits of the host country's staff constituted a challenge which required adjustment. Additionally, participants relocated to the Western countries pointed that the importance of understanding the local laws, regulation, and discrimination.

2).Cross-cultural adjustment

13 out of 15 participants suffered the difficulties in adjusting to living environment during the first few months of their relocation out of Taiwan. "Hard to blend into the local life", "uncertainty",

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"Isolation", "loneliness", "no friends", "helplessness", "chaotic", "depressed", and "frustrated" were the most impressive descriptions given by the participants while describing how their life was like during the first few months of their relocation out of Taiwan. "Catching fire on both sides" was the graphic description given by two participants relocated to the United States and Germany when talking about how he felt during the first few weeks of having to adjust to the pressures and challenges and of having to shape a new life style simultaneously.

As for cross-cultural adjustment in the work environment, all participants admitted that the local staffs' different work attitudes/behaviors made them suffer difficulties in cross-cultural adjustment, requiring them to adjust their strategies in order to more effectively manage and handle their work. Particularly participants who relocated to Southeast Asia said that they were frustrated, even angry at first when they noticed that the work attitude and behavior of their local staff apparently differed from the attitude and behavior of the home country staff. One participant described the situation this way:

> You would think the drop in productivity had to be very large when you saw the work attitudes of the people in the host country because we worked very hard in Taiwan, but these people worked so slowly.

Similarly, another spoke solemnly of what became the turning point in his adjustment to the local work environment:

> The Indonesian pace is slow. Therefore, you have to push them. They will express some opinions when you push them. In this case, then, you just have to keep talking.

3). Different language system

Under the conditions of different language, cross-cultural adjustment and cross-cultural interaction become more complicated and difficult for expatriates, and which, in turn, may influence their performance.

Participants assigned to English-speaking or non-English-speaking countries reported that lack of fluency in English and of the ability to speak the local language stood as major barriers to communication, job performance, and better interaction with the locals. The "accent" and "anticipatory fear" were common terms some participants used to describe their inability to speak English fluently when they arrived in the host country. 10 out of fifteen participants admitted that lack of sufficient English ability was one of main factors affecting their effectiveness because they

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were unable to speak fluently. In addition, some participants directly acknowledged having experienced some depression because of their inability to understand the accent of the locals. Furthermore, some participants even indicated that an "anticipatory fear" of speaking became an obstacle to full cross-cultural interaction.

On the other hand, situations appeared to be even more complicated for those relocated to non-English-speaking countries, given the fact that English is the second language of both expatriate managers and their local subordinates. To some extent, the participants' unfamiliarity with the local language gave rise to uncertainty and fear within the work environment during the initial stage of their relocation, particularly when the local subordinates communicated with each other in their native tongue. One participant, relocated to Germany and the United States, exemplified with the following scenario:

> I felt panicky the first time when I interacted with the local staff [Germany] because I did not know what they were doing. I would not feel secure until I had understood the task and had a grip on what needed to be done. You are a supervisor! A supervisor!?! So what!?! I was unable to step in and get involved. I was unable to sit down with them and communicate with them and find out about their problems.

B. Learning Competence Necessary for Cross-cultural Effectiveness

Learning cross-cultural competence to overcome stressors of cross-cultural interactions indentified above was a critical issue among the participants. All participants were aware of the need of acquiring competence relevant to coping with cross-cultural interactions in order to achieving their effectiveness or success. They all were willing to develop cultural awareness, establish interpersonal communication competence, and enhance English ability.

1). Developing Cultural Awareness

All participants revealed their tendencies to learn, understand, and appreciate local culture as well as develop appropriate behaviors develop after understanding that cultural disparities were main reasons leading to misperception and misunderstanding between them and their local staff.

For example, one participant relocated to Thailand followed local custom when he established a new branch in Bangkok:

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> I noticed that people in Thailand respect gods very much. Therefore, after knowing their custom I followed their usual ritual of worshiping gods in the opening ceremony of our new branch. Because of this, my local staff feel security and comfortable.

Participants relocated to South Asia were aware of the facts that the local staff's relaxed work attitude is common in Malaysia and tended to blend into their life to receive their trust and respect in order to improve their productivity and relationship.

2). Establishing Interpersonal Communication Competence

15 out of fifteen participants sought to establish effective communication through conveying accurately and clearly and acting appropriately and pointed out that effectively communicating with the local staff was one of the most important skill important to their success.

Out of fifteen, nine considered sincerity to be the most important factor contributing to effective cross-cultural interaction. Seven participants perceived respect is fundamental to enhance cross-cultural communication effectiveness. In addition, some believed that clarity and accuracy can reduce the happening of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. As one participant emphasized:

> It is important to provide clear explanations about why things are to be done because it is the best way to improve the effectiveness of communication and reduce the conflicts resulting result from misunderstanding.

3). Enhancing English Ability

Enhancing English ability was perceived by all participants as a basic prerequisite skill to work in a cross-cultural setting. Some participants emphasized that English ability can reduce the stress of cross-cultural adjustment and facilitate the effectiveness of communicating with the local staff. Other participants stressed that it is an essential tool to effective lead and manage the local staff. Although English training program was given to these participants before departure, all of them admitted that they need to learn more. To improve their English ability, they learned it through reading local newspaper, watching local TV, engaging with local people, and attending the local staff's parties. They all understood that their performance is critical to not only their own career development but also the success of their organizations. This understanding was transformed into a positive power that pushed them to acquire and learn competence necessary to their success. In particular, English is a prerequisite for expatriate managers. Said one participant: "English ability is

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very important to business, leadership and communication because an expatriate manager needs to expand the overseas business, lead teamwork, and communicate with others."

C. The Effect of Training Provision

All expatriate managers participated in this study were provided information-briefing orientation, pre-departure job training and a language learning program before departure. Basically, although working for different organizations, all participants went through similar pre-departure training procedures that focused on the familiarity with the business and which lasted from three days up to one month. Additionally, a three-month to one-year language learning program was given to these 15 participants before departure. In addition, eight of 15 participants received post-arrival CCT which was funded by their MNCs, but not compulsory.

Training provision play an important role in mitigating stressors of cross-cultural interactions encountered by expatriate managers and facilitating their development of cross-cultural competency to deal with the challenges they faced.

Pre-departure job training was found to have an impact on facilitating expatriate managers adjust to work environment but not adequate to deal with cross-cultural interactions. Pre-departing job training provided mainly consisted of sharing the experiences of previous expatriates, job introduction, and orientation from the different departments.

Although pre-departure training was provided, training regarding cross-cultural issues was not included. Each participant only received a brochure with information about the local culture and admitted it was not adequate to deal with cross-cultural adjustment. Added Participant 4:

We have a certain procedure before departure; training was given, but did not include cultural differences in the living environment or the folks' customs. Therefore, it mainly focused on job training. We spend about one month to train an expatriate.

Post-arrival CCT was identified to facilitate the development of cross-cultural competence. Eight of 15 participants, especially those relocated to the United States, stated that their organizations funded them to attend seminars that trained them in cultural awareness in order to prepare them appropriately to deal with the local culture and regulations. Stated one participant: "I attended training on harassment while I was assigned to the United States, therefore I was very careful when I talked with my local staff." On the other hand, some participants attended seminars related to the host country's regulations deemed relevant to their profession. One admitted that this

type of training provided him with some enlightenment. He explained that "to overcome work stress, I attended seminars. .... I learned enough to be able to make some adjustment to my work and that really helped me a lot."

DISCUSSION

This study generated important evidences to the facts demonstrating the importance of CCT either in the pre-departure or in the post-arrival stage critical to enhance the effectiveness of expatriate managers. First, the challenges of cross-cultural interaction perceived by participants in this study all had to do with the issue of cultural disparities. Second, although all participants received information-briefing orientation, pre-departure job training and a language learning program before departure, they all suffered cultural shock at the initial stage of their first relocations. Third, despite all participants were not given rigorous cross-cultural training before departure, all were considered culturally intelligent and proved to be so. Finally, attending post-arrival CCT was found to either alleviate the stress of cultural differences or to facilitate the development of cultural awareness and interpersonal communication skills to deal with challenges resulting from cultural differences. Based upon these evidences, this study suggests that expatriate managers may shorten cross-cultural adjustment or alleviate cultural shock if rigorous pre-departure CCT was given. In addition, the findings imply that cross-cultural competence can be learned and acquired which, in turn, indicates that CCT is worth the investment by the MNCs. Furthermore, the results of this study prove that CCT is imperative and effective to increase the effectiveness of expatriate assignments. Consequently, these all demonstrate that MNCs should provide CCT in order to maximize the effectiveness of their expatriate managers.

The findings of this study are consistent with past studies in terms of the significant factors added to the effectiveness of expatriate assignments, including cross-cultural training (Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2009; Selmer, 2005), cross-cultural adjustment (Selmer, 2005; Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2009; Ko and Yang, 2011), and communication skills (Ayoko, Hartel, Fisher and Fujimoto, 2004). Furthermore, the results of this study support that post-arrival CCT has a positive influence on expatriate adjustment and the development of cross-cultural competence. Its findings add to the understanding that cultural awareness, interpersonal communication skills, and English ability are critical competences for expatriate managers to cope with the challenges of cross-cultural

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adjustment, cross-cultural interactions, and cultural differences. Its findings also provide a guide for preparing or selecting an expatriate manger for a challenging overseas assignment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has identified a set of concepts that address the importance of CCT for expatriate managers on overseas assignments. The findings of the relationship between training provision and the alleviation of the stress of cultural differences imply the need for the MNCs to implement CCT that focuses on knowledge about local cultures and their regulations for that would be significant to the expatriates' adjustment to their living and working environments. The finding that English ability relates to expatriate effectiveness suggests that the provision for an English-learning program is worth the investments by the MNCs, for English ability is critical to effective cross-cultural interaction and communication. Additionally, although all participants were given English learning program before departure, they all admitted it was not enough. This may imply that post-arrival training focusing on English learning should be considered by non-English speaking MNCs.

Moreover, based on the results regarding the development of cultural awareness, effective communication skills, and English ability in facilitating coping with the challenges of overseas assignments, a recommendation can be made with respect to the implementation of CCT that would incorporate the development of these three critical skills into the training program of the expatriate managers. The fact that cultural awareness and communication skills can be developed and acquired through learning and observation strongly suggests the need for the implementation of CCT for the expatriate managers.

Finally, although this study may make a contribution to the research on the need of CCT for the effectiveness of expatriate managers by adding the perspectives of non-Western expatriates, it is important to point out that understanding the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of expatriate assignments is an imperative that still requires a great deal of research.

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