Understanding Expatriates' Cultural Adjustment and Performance in International Assignments

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Abstract
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Keywords
expatriates, expatriates’ family, cultural differences, qualitative research, narrative inquiry

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Understanding Expatriates' Cultural Adjustment and Performance in International Assignments

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The aim of this research is to explore the experience of expatriates about cultural differences between home and host countries through a narrative inquiry. There is not enough information in the literature about expatriates’ experiences and how they see the role of cultural differences, cultural distance and cultural competences in adapting to international assignments. Therefore, main research question was how expatriates working in a large multinational pharmaceutical company perceive the role of cultural differences and cultural competencies in their adjustment and performance. A total of 12 expatriates from different home countries on assignment in different host countries participated in the research. A semi-structured, in-depth interview was used for data collection. Data analysis resulted in four major themes – preparation for the assignment, managing cultural differences, adaptation of leadership style, and adaptation to everyday life. The results showed that for a more successful adaptation and effectiveness, a better, longer-term and more comprehensive preparation is needed. Knowledge of cultural differences has proven to be important for work adjustment, but even more for everyday life adjustment and family well-being. Motivation for learning about host country and willingness to understand host culture stood out as key determinants for successful adjustment.

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Introduction

Due to the globalization trends in business and organizations becoming more international and multinational, cultural diversity and leading business in a culturally diverse setting presents a great challenge to everyone involved in the business process. Therefore, expatriates on international assignments present an asset to organizations worldwide and international assignment success sometimes depends on expatriates’ understanding and managing of cultural differences between home and host country. Managing cultural distance between their home and host countries, in such a way that it does not pose a threat to job effectiveness and performance, represents a great challenge to business expatriates around the world. The objective of this research is to answer the question on how expatriates working in the MNC (multinational company) perceive the role of cultural differences, cultural distance and cultural competencies in their adjustment and work performance.

One of the variables for assessing expatriates’ performance that has been extensively studied is early termination of international assignments or intent for premature withdrawal from the assignments. According to Wang and Hinrichs (2005), expatriates who cannot adjust to their international assignment or a lack of good person-job fit are the main reasons for early termination of expatriate contract. Pre-expatriation training, including training in cultural
competencies plays an important role in whether an expatriate will finish the contract. The importance of cultural competences for the effectiveness of expatriates is expected given the evident cultural differences between cultures/countries where multinational companies operate. Indeed, cultural distance (the overall difference in national culture between two countries based on differences in key cultural dimensions) affects many organizational processes and outcomes in multinational companies, such as standardization of practice, transfer of knowledge and performance (Beugelsdijk et al., 2018). Peltokorpi and Froese (2011) hypothesised that cultural distance can increase anxiety and stress among expatriates, decrease motivation and ability to adjust, decrease performance levels, increase turnover intent, and decrease job satisfaction. Therefore, the role of cultural competencies, specifically cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003) in expatriate performance has been extensively explored. Cultural intelligence refers to a person’s capability to effectively function in a culturally diverse environment and includes cognitive, meta-cognitive, motivational, and behavioural aspects (Earley & Ang, 2003). To function effectively in a multicultural global business environment, individuals must adapt smoothly and successfully across cultural boundaries (Booysen, 2016; Gertsen, 1990). Research has shown that expatriates, compared to non-expatriates, had higher cultural intelligence (Sousa & Goncalves, 2017) which can be explained by a richer cross-cultural experience. Previous research showed that cultural intelligence was related to sociocultural adaptation and psychological adjustment (Ward et al., 2011), cultural adjustment (Karroubi et al., 2014; Lee & Sukoco, 2010; Ramalu et al., 2012), general, interaction and work adjustment (Malek & Budhwar, 2013), intercultural negotiation effectiveness (Imai & Gelfand, 2010), job satisfaction (Barakat et al., 2016; Sozbilir & Yesil, 2016), and assignment-specific performance (Setti et al., 2022). Furthermore, cultural intelligence has been related to several aspects of leadership behaviours such as transformational leadership behaviours (Elenkov & Manev, 2009) and cooperative relationship management behaviours (Imai & Gelfand, 2010) which can both be of interest for expatriates in managing positions.

Apart from individual characteristics, research has also found the role of expatriate’s family members and their difficulties with adjustment as reasons for an expatriate’s failure (Cole & Nesbeth, 2014; Haslberger & Brewster, 2008). Meta-analysis of 84 independent studies on the social support provided by community-, work-, and family-domain agents in relation to expatriate success measured as adjustment, commitment, performance, and retention (van der Laken et al., 2019) showed that family support had stronger influence on performance and retention outcomes than did work-domain support.

Although previous, mostly quantitative research, showed that cultural competences (especially cultural intelligence) are important for the successful adaptation and efficiency of expatriates, research that explores the experience of expatriates with an emphasis on the importance of cultural differences, the way in which these cultural differences affect their adaptation and success in work are relatively scarce. There are rare studies in which the authors, through in-depth interviews with expatriates, tried to explain their experiences in adaptation and work performance, and to discover factors that would facilitate adaptation and improve work efficiency. Data from the literature point to some significant predictors of adaptation and success for expatriates, but we do not have enough data on how expatriates in large multinational companies face cultural challenges, what are the obstacles in exploiting their work potential and how companies could improve their expatriate practice with an emphasis on the individual and subjective experiences.

The Role of the Researcher

As a researcher, it is an important notion that I share a lot of similar experiences with participants in current study. I am an expatriate female and senior executive team member of
the company where this research is conducted, therefore, it was essential throughout my work to keep the positionality issue (Andrew & Robb, 2011) at the forefront of my mind due to my dual relationships. Many years of work in an MNC that uses expatriation and numerous assignments across the globe have helped me in exploring this phenomenon and to address it from the scientific discourse. I approached the interviews with the participants, recording the answers and then the detailed analysis of the content with a lot of professional experience in the field of research, but strictly taking care to present the information obtained as objectively as possible.

**Aim of the Current Research**

This research is qualitative narrative model research. The aim was to gain deeper insight into expatriates' reflections on the role of cultural differences in their performance and adjustment. Bearing in mind the need for continuous improvement of human resource (HR) practices related to expatriates, the results of qualitative research based on the individual experiences of expatriates can offer guidelines for improving practices, with the aim of better adaptation and effectiveness of expatriates in an international assignment. Therefore, qualitative research was conducted on a sample of expatriates in mostly managerial positions working in a large multinational pharmaceutical company with main research question being how expatriates working in an MNC (multinational companies) perceive the role of cultural differences in their adjustment and performance?

**Methods**

**Research Design**

The research used a qualitative approach, and narrative research design with the aim of representing and understanding the experience of expatriates working in an MNC, specifically, their perception on how cultural differences influenced their adjustment and performance. The focus was on potential difficulties that expatriates encountered working in an MNC due to cultural differences. The narrative model was chosen for data collection due to its possibilities of detecting and understanding participants’ experiences through stories they shared from their international assignments. According to Riessman (2008), narrative analysis includes interpreting and analyzing the stories that people talk about their experiences and helps to understand the social and cultural context in which they are situated. Like other qualitative designs, narrative design can be used to identify the themes and patterns within the participants’ stories.

**Sample**

Purposive sampling was applied with the aim of covering a geographical heterogeneous sample of expatriates. The sample included three females and nine males from Europe, North America, South America, South Africa, and Asia. They had two and a half international assignments on average, which ranged from one to four assignments. Duration of their assignments varied from six months to three and a half years. They stated their position as senior leader (N = 6), senior manager (N = 4), or individual contributor (N = 2). Detailed data on participants are presented in Appendix B.
Data Collection Procedure

As the first step, the company HR team (human resource team specialized in workforce insights and data analytics specialists) prepared a headcount report from the company HR system (Workday). This report contained data of all employees that are currently on the international assignment, outside of their home country, or were on the assignment during previous three years. The report captured other characteristics important for this research, such as gender, age, length of expatriate status, number of different expatriates’ assignments, geography, and position level. Out of the selected employees, HR team randomly selected 15 members as potential participants. Those participants were contacted via e-mail by the senior HR manager. In case the selected participants had not responded, a reminder e-mail was sent to them in ten days. The 12 participants who accepted participation in interviews were contacted by phone (due to the constraints of the COVID pandemic) and were given the possibility to choose between face-to-face interviews or interviews by the Zoom system. HR team did not have any other role in this research.

The interviews were conducted during May 2020 and lasted up to one hour. One interview per participant was conducted. The participants were asked permission to audio-record interviews and to take notes during the interviews. They were allowed to withdraw from the research at any time without explanation of their reasons. All individual data were anonymized by the HR team and were not disclosed to the researcher. For confidentiality’s sake the participants’ identities were protected using codes instead of names in all written material and reports. The procedures for sample selection and data collection were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Board of IEDC School of Management. GDPR rules were followed by ensuring that each participant accepts the usage of the descriptive data collected throughout the research, but with protection of all personal data through anonymization. The research was conducted in line with the Code of ethical practice of interactions with employees, based on company SoP (standard of practice).

In Depth-Interviews

In designing interview questions (Appendix A), as an incentive for participants to tell stories that illustrate the answers to the key questions, several aspects have been accounted for. First, questions were open-ended, but such that they enable the participants to tell stories about their past (and current) experiences as expatriates. The participants had the liberty to describe their experiences and thoughts on the research problem. Furthermore, questions were concise and focused so that the participants understood them well and could be more focused in their stories. The questions were generated in order to provide expatriates an opportunity to address the importance of cultural adjustment and cultural intelligence, and explain the ways motivation, behaviour and knowledge about different cultures might have influenced their adjustability and coping in their everyday job. For the purpose of conducting interviews, an interview protocol was developed consisting of general data, instructions for the interviewer to standardize the procedure, the questions, space between questions for noting the answers, and a final thank-you statement. The interview guide was developed, and it was piloted on three expatriates who did not participate in the main research. The pilot interviews were done as practice, to test the suitability and comprehensiveness of the questions, and to assess approximate length.
Data Analysis

According to the established steps within thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Glonti & Hren, 2018) data were read, coded, organized in themes and subthemes, structured according to the relationship between themes, refined, and finally defined in a thematic map. Thematic analysis was used in steps, as described by several authors (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Glonti & Hren, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). In the first phase of thematic analysis, all collected material was read at least twice. After reading the material, the verbatim spreadsheet was analysed in order to identify key themes, insights and any apparent relationships.

For each question, responses were reviewed across each interviewee’s response. Key viewpoints/topics were noted against each question and either added to, or reinforced, as the responses of each interviewee were being reviewed. Where a potential theme from one interviewee was challenged by the responses of another, this was noted. By following this process for each individual question, a set of key topics was identified, along with a good indication of which topics were consistent and which not, along with their perceived impact. This phase included generating initial codes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Saldaña, 2013), focusing on specific data characteristics, and important sections of the transcriptions were analysed and labelled. In the next step of analysis, the coded data were sorted and organized creating themes and potentially subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, the key topics from each question were compared across questions in order to assess any further reinforcement or challenge, or to examine any potential interdependencies. These results were then compiled into a list of “master themes” which were seen as the most raised, most consistent and most impactful. The refinement of the created themes followed in the fourth phase of the data analysis, especially if some themes did not have substantial data to support them. Reviewing and refining the themes was done at the level of coded data extracts (finding coherence in all extracts for a theme) and at the level of the data set (considering the validity of themes in relation to the data set). This phase resulted in a map of master themes, which were seen as the most raised and most consistent. The data was then searched once again to find the best illustrative examples to bring these key themes to life. Lastly, the source data was used once again in order to see if there were any apparent correlations with any of the coding questions (for example, if people with more assignment experience appeared to adapt more easily to different cultures, etc). This skeleton was then used as the basis for the analysis. The analysis was done based on the framework of insights resulting from the qualitative analysis but filling in the gaps with more details and examples, plus floating potential insights and hypotheses. It was also decided, given the nature of the emerging insights, to focus some of the information into points specifically aimed at informing and enhancing the company approach to assignment management and to see if there were any conjectural hypotheses about the personal attributes of individuals which might give them greater or lesser potential to succeed in an international assignment. This latter point was offered as a partial means of addressing one of the insights emerging from the data itself.

Since the advantages of thematic analysis are flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017), and summarizing key features of the data set and unanticipated insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006), this approach was found most suitable for analysing the data obtained via interviews.

Results

After analysing all the data, four themes and ten subthemes were derived from the narratives of participants. Theme Preparation for international assignment included three related subthemes – Support from the company, Preparation for family members and Single
point of contact. Theme managing cultural differences offered two main subthemes – motivation for learning on host country and knowledge of cultural differences in work / life domain. Theme adaptation of leadership style included decision making, task orientation vs. relationship orientation and communication and interpretation of nonverbal signs. Finally, theme adaptation to everyday life included two subthemes related to schooling and health-care system, and the issue of isolation on international assignments. Themes and subthemes are presented in the subsequent part of the paper with analysis of participants’ experiences and examples of their narratives.

Preparation for International Assignment

While preparation was recognized by most participants as an important aspect of international assignments, several participants said they had no formal preparation, or it was very scarce. Overall, all participants stated that formal preparation supplied to potential assignees by the organization ahead of the assignment is important but sometimes limited and inconsistent. Some of the participants received none, whereas some received elements such as cultural awareness training and/or some degree of language support where applicable. Many reported such help, where it existed, as of medium quality and limited benefit or relevance. Interviewee D said: “For the first UK assignment they gave me a book in the mail about the British way of life. That was all, but it was still helpful.” In most cases, where provided, it was for the benefit of the assignee only rather than for their family. Nearly all respondents did some level of preparatory learning themselves. This comprised some or all the following: reading books, articles, online content or watching TV documentaries about the host culture or talking to colleagues from/in the host country and previous/current assignees. A minority were able to visit the host country ahead of an assignment commencing. For all, there was a realization that preparation (own and company-sponsored) should start earlier. The importance of the preparation was emphasised by Interviewee F: “Preparation is also vital to understand differences or at least know about them.”

These subthemes emerged from participants’ answers, (i) support from the company, (ii) family preparation, and (iii) single point of contact in host country.

Support from the Company

All respondents described support as only starting either shortly before or on arrival in the host culture. This support package typically comprised allocation of a Global mobility partner (GMP), temporary support through an external supplier and local HR support. For most of the participants this was a temporary arrangement of one to two months’ duration. Interviewee F described it like this:

Company has been pretty good at supporting before and right after (first month or so). There were some resources for cultural learning before, but not a lot. Best was to find someone locally to help you. Company usually partners with local third parties for visa etc. and then local orientation and language classes. For some assignments I didn't have that much warning but in general I had enough time to prepare.

Most of the participants had some criticism about the preparation and support on their assignments. They found preparation not starting early enough, prior to the assignment: Interviewee G, “No. Initially discussed a few months in advance…,” Interviewee J, “No. Nothing offered. Adaptation to local culture from company could have been better…Company
needs to do more in advance,” Interviewee L, “This was only the case when I did my first assignment in 2007 when I got a cultural briefing,” or not being comprehensive enough. For example, Interviewee I: “A little bit of cultural awareness training,” Interviewee K: “I was given a cross-cultural one-day session which I found very useful…,” Interviewee H: “Only did cultural orientation after seven months…,” or Interviewee E:

Not a lot in terms of stuff from the country. We got a subscription to Focus magazine, paired up with a mobility partner who helped with visa, schooling, cars, etc. They hung around the whole time and were excellent - apparently not always the case. They were also based in the same office. This person was becoming responsible for more and more assignees until it was unmanageable and she left.

Whether they were satisfied or not and whether they would repeat the assignment or not, all participants stressed the importance of better preparation and support throughout the assignment. For example, Interviewee L: “I think that I would follow the same recipe since it has been successful for me. I would hope to have smoother support though,” Interviewee E: “Make sure beforehand that right support system was in place - committed manager, right fit for the family at the right time,” Interviewee C: “We need continuing support from someone who checks in from time to time.”

Preparation for Family Members

Given the importance of adjustment, not only the expatriate’s but also family members’, the analysis revealed many thoughts on better preparations for family members, especially regarding the schooling systems. These results came out from the analysis as by far the most common negative cultural experiences with major subsequent implications of an assignment. In the cases where cultural acclimatization arguably went most smoothly, a common factor was the assignee landing in the host country weeks or even months ahead of their family joining them. This allowed time for administrative needs to be addressed, accommodation sorted and a level of cultural familiarity to have been developed by the assignee in such a way that the family was able to hit the ground running and be exposed to more limited change and stress. Within this subtheme, many participants expressed their view on how preparation affected their family members. For example, Interviewee A said: “Not much for the family – language support only 40 hours from Italian teaching English online. Tick the box, low quality, nothing else available”; Interviewee G: “No visits… Once landed, there was a service available to help with housing, schools etc.,” or Interviewee J: “Company needs to be more aware of what it will be like for the family and do more in advance.”

Single Point of Contact

While some respondents were able to enjoy long-term, fruitful relationships with their GMPs, many reported challenges around having no single point person (Interviewee A: “You have to talk with six different people”). Several participants stressed the importance of having only one point of contact to assist the expatriate and his/her family in adapting to the new environment, while some pointed to this as insufficient. Several different experiences were presented within this subtheme, so it seems that the preferred way of organizing support during assignment depends on the individual. For example, some participants pointed out that it would be better to have a single point of contact. As Interviewee A said:
Level of support was an external consultant who helped with the move - schooling, housing etc. Not always super helpful when you outsource too many things and quality of service was average. Schooling guidance was helpful, housing was ok, missing part was one point of contact for the move - everyone is doing a different piece, especially in HR. You end up working with five or six different people. It felt like company not used to moving people. HR not up to moving this many people.

Other participants also mentioned they would prefer single point of contact (for example Interviewee B: “Outsourcing models don’t help. Lots of different people, a number of local agencies. Need single point of contact…”), and some consider it insufficient, for example Interviewee I: “Had point of contact to sort out social security number, housing…. Not sure if I had a formal company contact. Had HR contact to help with some stuff.”

Managing Cultural Differences

Cultural differences emerged during most of the interviews and answers to almost all questions. Analysis resulted in two key subthemes - motivation for learning on host country and knowledge of cultural differences in work/life environment.

Motivation for Learning on Host Country

Participants were unanimous in stating that it was critical to make some effort to understand the culture of the host country. Responses relating to the perceived importance of understanding and learning about the host culture, and in what ways assignees went about this were stressed out during each interview. Nearly all assignees felt that the most important attitude determining success or failure was the degree to which an assignee and their family committed to and threw themselves into learning about and interacting with the host culture. As Interviewee L commented: “It is important to indulge in the local culture because if you cannot appreciate the environment, you are in, then you cannot be happy.” Majority of participants stated that it was important to put the effort into learning and adapting to the host culture, for example Interviewee J: “If you want to get the most from the experience you have to engrain yourself and understand how people do things and help your family integrate also” or Interviewee E: “I was able to immerse myself in all the people.” Proactiveness was key to learning about the host culture, but it was acknowledged that this required considerable energy and effort when also dealing with day-to-day work and managing the level of change as a family unit. Those who were unable or less willing to summon up this additional energy found it harder to move forward with some form of cultural integration and were more likely to experience issues such as a feeling of social isolation within the family unit. The participants who felt most motivated to learn about their host culture and were proactive in going about it, reported fewer issues with integration. Apart from travelling as a way of learning on host country (for example Interviewee D: “My wife and I travelled a lot to understand countries”; Interviewee E: “Travelled a lot whilst we were there”), participants found it useful to read books or web contents about host culture or watch television programs (for example, Interviewee E: “I read a lot of stuff in books and online,” or Interviewee F: “Reading around”; or Interviewee K: “I used local Singaporean TV to watch documentaries before I went and when I got there I sat in cafes and watched”).
Knowledge of Cultural Differences in Work / Life Domain

Few participants pointed out the importance of having knowledge on host country culture for work success, for example Interviewee B said: “…. critical. How people do business, e.g., people in China won’t give you feedback etc. In Sweden I learnt that people often won’t say anything and will go along with you.” Interviewee L said: “It is very important to your work success but also your happiness.” The most mentioned cultural difference for work was related to the way in which different cultures dealt with the challenges of voicing opinions, giving feedback, managing disagreement and making decisions. Most interviewees described this as the “directness” or “indirectness” of a culture, manifesting itself in the ways in which people discussed issues, mainly in the work environment. Indirect cultures, as described, tended to feature an avoidance of direct disagreement, people keeping opinions to themselves during meetings, a reluctance to disagree or offer feedback which might be perceived as negative and slow, and hierarchy-driven decision making. “Direct” cultures on the other hand, were described as far less inhibited and less hierarchical, with a free exchange of opinions and conflicting viewpoints in-situ resulting in speedier decisions and more open agendas. It is worth noting that in most cases, this concerned someone from a more “direct” culture (frequently “Western”) entering a host culture deemed more “indirect” (frequently “Eastern” or “Middle Eastern” culture). These assignees described how this indirect culture was very different either from that of other cultures that they had worked and lived in, or from their native culture. Interviewee K gave a good example:

Singaporeans are more westernised. Chinese culture is more indirect. People are quite political with what they say so it is hard to know whether people agree or not - people will not say no but not say yes either. At work, I was moved to manage a team and found that people will tell you things are under control when they are not, trying to solve their problems before letting you know. By the time you know there is a problem it is usually a big one. Hours are much longer and blurred line between work and non-work. In Singapore we plan to death and then don’t execute so well. In China there is minimum planning and then excellent execution. It is quite hierarchical. Chinese are very different outside of China than inside.

This can result in misunderstandings around decisions, communication challenges, frustration at the pace of progress, and in some cases delays or failures in building relationships, as many interviewees mentioned. A symbol of the interaction between “direct” and “indirect” cultures described by assignees was the demarcation of “no go areas” – topics which either host culture or home culture considered off-limits, and which created discomfort and even, in extreme cases, offence. Examples of these symbolic no-go topics included the discussion of remuneration or wealth, strong political opinions, gun ownership and giving feedback to or expressing disagreement with someone in front of others.

What prevailed in most of the answers were things related to everyday life situations. Several participants stressed out the importance of knowing and understanding host culture for everyday life and adjustment. For example, Interviewee J said: “Very important, exceptionally so. If you want to get the most from the experience, you have to engrain yourself and understand how people do things and help your family integrate also.” Interviewee E was more specific and said: “Understanding how local market healthcare worked, etc.” as well as Interviewee D: “How does taxation work, utilities, etc.” Understanding why people do or say the things they do helped assignees and their families settle into the host culture more quickly and become more effective in managing both work and wider life. This also depends on the
level of difference and knowledge between the cultures. For example, European Interviewee F noted that: “For US I was less worried about. For China I did more work.”

The experience of the interviewees suggested that it is a mistake to underestimate cultural differences between two countries when on the surface they appear similar. Interviewee C said: “You might assume that you are more alike than you are. In UK, we ended up living in the countryside in Wales.” Although European he said: “It was quite hard to get into the social life. British people are very polite and kind but often say nice things without meaning them. Language - you do direct translation and not nuances.” On the contrary, during his time in Puerto Rico: “We ended up in the expatriate community, with people in the same situation, it was really good as Puerto Ricans were more welcoming.” Equally, there was at least one case where the assignee felt that cultural differences had been over-exaggerated and represented an out-of-date view. Another potential misstep is not to consider business culture and wider everyday culture as two things. For example, the UK and the US may share many elements of business culture but have many small but important differences in terms of everyday culture. A person should not assume one through the knowledge of the other. Interviewee D highlighted this in the following way:

We liked the inclusivity and privacy in the UK. People don’t judge you by your assets but by your opinions. If I had come straight to US I would hate it, but because I was in Europe first it is different.

**Adaptation of Leadership Style**

Participants' responses showed that in fact cultural differences did not affect their way of leading / working, at least not to the extent that would be expected. It is a multinational company whose expatriates work in positions that are globally similar and the way they work depends less on the culture of the society / community / country, and more on the company culture. International assignments are usually global, and expatriates work with global team members. Still, the importance of understanding the host culture and showing respect was a common theme across interviews. Interviewee L, on the assignment in Japan, described it like this:

You have to be authentic entering new cultures - respect culture but also be yourself. This has been key in me being invited back again. I found that finding that blend between respecting cultural norms and being authentic was key.

In other cases, however, it is worth noting that assignees saw this necessary adaptation as nothing unusual and simply as an element of the natural and everyday skills required by a leader in adapting to the situation and audience. For example, Interviewee C said:

I haven't really had to [adapt my leadership style] since I am still doing my old role and also working with same people who are already global. It is like a cocoon around you since you have little interaction with locals.

Participants have singled out specific issues, and the following subthemes were derived: (i) decision making; (ii) task orientation vs. relationship orientation; (iii) communication including language and interpretation of nonverbal signs.
**Decision Making**

Interviewee F noted:

Very big difference was decision making. China - asking team mate to do something for you doesn’t work - you ask the manager to ask them for you. In the US also, there are different mechanisms to getting things done. More layers there. People feel empowered but also a power gradient.

Or Interviewee E: “It helped that I like to sit back and listen before making my views known. Asking lots of questions first, then coming back with recommendations, trying to get local markets to align with global strategy.”

**Task Orientation vs. Relationship Orientation**

Individuals exhibiting a high task orientation cultural norm sometimes bumped up against individuals with high relationship orientation, and vice versa. Interviewee B noted:

Takes a while to get into the point of getting feedback. Spending time chatting to people and …talk about making decisions. Have to give them space to do this. Consensus need can be challenged. People got to know my style too and we came up with a way of doing things. It is important to have two to three people in your team to help you.

Interviewee D said: “I learned how to read people's face when I am talking. In US I had to adapt a bit to give space for small talk (I am quite direct). Need to allow them to make their points.” A few interviewees mentioned that they often found themselves having to adapt to this cultural dilemma and to manage frustrations resulting from it from their own cultural perspectives. Interviewee G said:

Extremely collaborate and very relationship-based culture in Canada. Couldn’t jump right to business, had to do personal first. Very change averse so I tried to get them more aligned with company culture so that when change came, they could move along with it better.

A common behavioural adaptation was the recognition that people must be allowed time and space to make their points in the way they wanted to. This might mean creating space for “chit-chat” before getting to the point, or avoiding the urge to jump in with one’s own opinion until there has been more than adequate opportunity for individuals to offer their own views on the matter.

**Communication Including Language and Interpretation of Non-Verbal Signs**

When it came to differences in language, there was obviously a challenge in accurately communicating to one another, which might result in miscommunications and differences in interpretation of decisions. As Interviewee L said:

In Japan the biggest problem was the language - English level very poor in [Company name] Japan at the time. Third biggest market for [Company name] which made it very hard at the time. I was also young in a hierarchical society.
In these situations, some assignees described how they adapted to increase their attention on visual clues such as facial expression and body language in order to gauge how another was feeling. This was especially important in the indirect cultures where individuals of the host culture might not necessarily offer up disagreement with points raised in a group or face to face situation. Also, following up with individuals one-to-one after a meeting to check understanding or reaction was also seen as a highly effective adaptation to such situations. Interviewee H highlighted the need to: “Be really mindful to follow up in writing to avoid misunderstanding in language.” Other approaches employed involved assignees reconsidering the type and frequency of their communication approaches. Some interviewees described how they had to learn their way around local hierarchies and influence channels, and some developed relationships with certain members of their team or colleagues whereby these locals acted as ‘fixers’ for them, helping them to influence and manage wider relationships with other team members or stakeholders.

It is tempting to suggest that language differences would play out less in the workplace due to the ubiquitous nature of the English language. However, this was not always the case, particularly in places like China and Japan where coming up to speed with the host culture language in short order proved critical to many assignees. Participants on assignments in non-English-speaking countries but living and working with many fellow expats found that there was not as much of a need for local language as they had perhaps thought. Interviewee J said:

Although people were friendly and easy to get along, we were in a predominantly expat community so not as easy to get to know local people. Language is a challenge because there are a lot of Arabic speaking people in Dubai. I was never offered the training but equally I haven’t asked. Really difficult for kids who were 3.5 years in UK and made lots of friends who they had to leave behind. In the UK the international school was very international. In Dubai it was very Asian/North African centric.

It is equally not universally true to say that there were no language challenges when moving between two cultures sharing a common language. In such cases, assignees were frequently tripped up by subtleties and nuances of language.

**Adaptation to Everyday Life**

For adjustment outside the work, participants mostly stressed out the importance of understanding health-care system and especially schooling system, when they were accompanied by their children.

**Understanding Schooling System and Health-Care System**

Schooling emerged as perhaps the greatest challenge for many on assignment and language differences played a role within this. Although it was typical for the children of assignees to be placed in “international schools,” the mix of different nationalities was dependent upon the locality. In some countries, children and adults alike were able to mix and communicate with diverse peoples, including those of their own home nationality already in the expatriate community. But in several cases, the children of assignees found themselves in schools with children of a very narrow mix of other nationalities, often very different to their own and not necessarily able to speak a shared language such as English. Countries which may share the same language may also have radically different education systems. To add to the
challenge there are semantic differences too. A public school in the US means pretty much the opposite in the UK for example. There are differences in the ages at which students move from one tier to another within the education system, different exams, different terms and school years, different syllabi and different academic awards. This makes it very hard to fully understand what will be involved in starting an academic career in one country, continuing it in another, and then going into a third or returning to the first. Parents found these differences both bewildering and frustrating beyond any other single factor, and this was perhaps the biggest single factor contributing to success or failure of international assignments for those assignees with children of school age. Interviewee A said: “When you have kids there are lots of questions - different schooling system, different services etc., tax, benefits. You have to find info yourself or by asking colleagues.” Interviewee C noted a similar issue:

It is easier to move when you have small kids. Now, we have one with us and another back in Sweden. As kids get older the social scene as parents is harder to manage. You can't arrange play dates for 16-year-olds!

Interviewee A: “I would seriously consider moving with the company again. I would invest more time in transition to find the right house and school.” Interviewee C: “Biggest challenge has been the school. I would have pushed harder to get more support. I would engage myself more to understand schooling as this time nobody explained to us how High School worked in US versus Sweden,” Interviewee G: “I would strive to understand the schooling system and potential impact on children better.”

In the same way, healthcare, and how to access it, was also a cultural difference which many described upon landing in the host culture. There was no suggestion that interviewees felt that they did not have access to healthcare if needed; but since this was generally via a company insurance scheme it was often unclear as to how to access local healthcare if needed. Some assignees described how they had no idea which local hospital they were in the catchment area for, or how to access a doctor for minor matters. Interviewee G said: “Culture in Canada for healthcare is a little more government dependent than in US. Going to the doctor means that I had to wait for 3 months after we got into the country.” Interviewee F said: “Healthcare - glad I wasn’t sick in China. Had Company number but unclear how to contact people locally.”

**Isolation**

Several participants mentioned the feeling of being isolated and having difficult time fitting in, for themselves but even more for their family members. For example, Interviewee D said:

Most difficult thing is the isolation. There is a lot of segregation between ethnic groups. How US sees rest of the world and their perceptions. Houses are very big and far from each other. There are many subjects which are off limits - politics, guns, religion.

Interviewee C said: “It is hard for kids to fit in.” Similarly, Interviewee H pointed the issue of being different for the children and said: “For my youngest child, she is the only UK child at school and one of two Europeans,” or Interviewee J: “It was very hard on first day of school for kids… Nobody spoke to them, and they felt nobody wanted to talk to them. Much harder for my wife. Hard to make friends …” Interviewee L pointed out the feeling of not being accepted with following words:
You will never be accepted as a non-foreigner……managing relationships proved the hardest thing on assignment. In Japan the biggest problem was the language - English level is very poor in the Company in Japan. It is also much more difficult when you are young and lower in the hierarchy, which was my case.

Still, there were also answers showing that not all of the participants had troubles fitting in. For example, Interviewee K (Singaporean) on the assignment in China said: “People were very accepting and kind and friendly. It was a friendly city to live in,” and Interviewee I (Western European on the assignment in North America) said: “We found it quite easy. Some things are better, some worse.”

**Discussion**

Detailed analysis across the themes and sub-themes pointed to several important conclusions that could have implications for HR practice. The results pointed to the importance of comprehensive preparation followed by continuous support throughout the expatriation process - from preparatory period, through adjustment process to life in a new environment. Enhancing the preparation for an assignment through a richer and more comprehensive exploration of the “nitty gritty” of life in another culture and doing so from an earlier stage proved to be significant factor for success, as shown in the interviews. Results imply that preparation for an assignment should be much broader and more comprehensive than it really is. These results are consistent with the review by Filipic Sterle et al. (2018) showing that, in addition to several personal characteristics of individuals (expatriates and partners), comprehensive preparation for an international assignment, including company support and support from host country nationals before and during the international assignment, has positive effects on psychological and cultural adjustment, reduced stress and assignment success. The majority view within current study was that the company needs to give better and more detailed information to inform expatriate decision making and to lessen the culture shock. Knowledge of cultural differences and managing those differences in work and outside of the work proved to be very important for expatriates’ experience which is in line with existing literature on expatriates. What stood out was motivation for learning about host country as one of the key prerequisites for successful adjustment. These finding complements and supports the results of previous studies showing that motivational aspect of cultural intelligence (MCQ) was the strongest predictor of cross-cultural adjustment, expatriate satisfaction, and expatriate desires towards the future (Huff, 2013). Wu and Ang (2011) also found that only MCQ predicted general cross-cultural adjustment in a sample of expatriates in Singapore.

Amongst the important points which have emerged as representing the interplay between culture and work, and pivotal to the success or failure of individuals working in cultures other than their own, was one’s understanding of subtle and not so obvious differences between cultures. The findings showed that countries which appear to have similar cultures on the surface are not necessarily any easier to adapt to than those which appear, at first sight, to be extremely different. In fact, an under-estimation of difference can encourage individuals and companies alike to put less effort into preparation and therefore be under-prepared for the realities. Similarly, Baum and Isidor (2017, p. 172) noted that similarity between cultures does not impact uncertainty expatriates will face in an international assignment. In fact, some authors note that if there is a greater difference in cultures, expatriates are usually very aware of these differences, so they adapt more easily because they are better prepared. On the other hand, underestimating differences usually also means poorer preparation which can ultimately lead to more sources of stress and frustration (Brewster, 1995; O’Grady & Lane, 1996).
Cultural integration is not necessarily the goal, but rather achieving a positive balance between cultures which is sufficient to allow positive experiences for all. In addition to the cultural differences that expatriates and their family members encountered in everyday life, cultural difference that was the most prominent in interviews was directedness and in-directedness in the working context. This referred to the openness in communication versus the reticence that sometimes disguises the message, example being differences between Chinese and Western culture. Results of a study by Wang et al. (2017) on a sample of Chinese expatriate managers working in multinational companies showed that in-directedness in communication was a cause of misunderstanding with their foreign colleagues for half of the sample. Similarly, the results of the interview data in my study showed that the most common need for adaptation reported by the interviewees was in the way in which work matters were discussed in meetings, opinions raised, feedback given, and decisions made. The most frequent scenario was when the assignee from a more “direct” culture, where there was open and frank discussion of different opinions, open feedback and challenge, and less hierarchical decision making found themselves operating in a more “indirect” culture where the world of work did not operate like this. The practical implication of these results points to the importance of more detailed preparation during which the expatriate will be able to become acquainted with all the important features of the communication style in the culture to which he or she is going.

When discussing the key factors that are important for expatriate success, family happiness turned out to be one of the most important aspects of expatriate international assignments. The results showed that in the assignment preparation and management, the key factor impacting success or failure was the happiness of the family. This can also be linked to the participants’ answers to the question of what was the most challenging for them in the adaptation process. Namely, the schooling and healthcare systems were highlighted as very important for successful adjustment, and these factors are important for all family members. Differences in education systems and issues related to education/school were often highlighted as challenges to be faced during their stay abroad, which required extra effort from both expatriates and their family members. The fact that the adjustment and happiness of the whole family are very important in expatriates’ evaluation of the whole expatriate experience has important implications since it suggests that the balance of focus in assignment management should be turned somewhat inside-out and what these assignees were saying unanimously, however, is that effort should be re-focused onto the family. These finding align with the literature on expatriate adjustment and success that often includes family, especially the spouse, as a very important factor for expatriate outcomes in international assignments (Lazarova et al., 2010; McNulty, 2012; van der Laken et al., 2019). Furthermore, previous research has shown that the expatriate’s family members and their difficulties with adjustment are important reasons for expatriate failure (Cole & Nesbeth, 2014; Haslberger & Brewster, 2008). Copeland and Norrell (2002) examined women spouses who had to move in different countries because of their husbands’ work and found more cohesive families, involvement in the decision to move and social support, especially support from local, rather than long-distance providers as predictors of better adjustment. A recent meta-analysis (Biswa et al., 2022) showed that expatriates’ general well-being was more strongly predicted by non-work-related antecedents, compared to work-related antecedents which also emphasises the important role of family factors in expatriation process.

Before concluding, it is necessary to refer to the shortcomings of the conducted research. Although a relatively small sample was included, it can be considered acceptable in qualitative research designs and narrative inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To mediate for possible organisational contingencies all participants was sampled from one multinational company, therefore it is possible that the experiences of expatriates from other companies might differ significantly. When interpreting the results, one should consider the role of the
company culture and company practices which can be very important factors for expatriates’ experiences in international assignments. Despite the shortcomings, results confirmed existing findings from the literature on expatriates, and provided better insight into personal experiences of expatriates facing challenges related to cultural differences and the important role of the family. A more comprehensive and longer-term preparation that includes the whole family unit, not only assignee, is needed for ensuring successful adjustment and expatriates’ effectiveness. Furthermore, being proactive and motivated to learn about host country and to understand cultural differences between home and host country contributes to more successful adaptation and efficiency of expatriates, but also to the satisfaction of the whole family, which is very important determinant for expatriates’ success (Biswas et al., 2022; Lazarova et al., 2010; McNulty 2012; van der Laken et al., 2019). Looking at the family unit as the customer, doing so from an earlier stage in the preparation for an assignment, and checking in regularly was the clear opportunity presented. The implication is clearly a shift in the way in which an organization looks at the return on investment (ROI) of an assignment. Companies can achieve this by following discussions ahead of the assignment to involve the assignee and their wider family, greater focus on the potential opportunities and challenges for the wider family of living in another culture, looking beyond work to everyday life or starting the whole process of preparation earlier in order to allow this and considering non-work-related necessities. Furthermore, the duration of support options should be considered as well as remaining in touch with family members, with global GMPs proactively reaching out and enquiring as to the wellbeing of family members themselves rather than just the assignee.

References


Setti, I., Sommovigo, V., & Argentero, P. (2022). Enhancing expatriates’ assignments success: The relationships between cultural intelligence, cross-cultural adaptation and


## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

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<th>Topics</th>
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| Background information                            | A. What is your current position in the company?  
B. How many expatriate assignments have you done so far with the company?  
C. How many years would you say that the scope of your role has been international? |
| Preparation for the assignment                   | 1. Did you have any formal preparation for assignments? If so, what?                                                                      |
| Cultural differences between home and host country (on current assignment) | 2. For your most recent assignment (or most meaningful), how would you summarise the differences between your host country culture and that of your home country? Did you have any problems adjusting to every-day life in your host country? If yes, how would you describe them? Which was the most challenging?  
3. Were you motivated to learn and understand the host culture? How did you go about that? |
| Adjustment/performance: the role of cultural competencies | 4. What do you think are the most important factors in success or failure in expatriate assignments?  
5. How important is understanding host country culture? Do you think your knowledge of the host country culture helped you? In what ways?  
6. Did you need to adapt your leadership style in the host culture in order to drive performance? In what way? |
Author Note

Iskra was appointed Executive Vice-President (EVP), Vaccines & Immune Therapies Unit at AstraZeneca in November 2021, and is responsible for leading all COVID-19 therapy area activities, including R&D, commercial, medical, as well as AstraZeneca’s global infectious disease teams. Prior to this role, Iskra was EVP for the Europe & Canada region and has been a member of AstraZeneca’s Senior Executive Team (SET) since 2017. Having trained as a Doctor of Dental Medicine at the Medical University of Zagreb, Croatia, Iskra joined AstraZeneca in 2001. During this time, Iskra has held a variety of in-market, regional sales and marketing and general management roles, including Head of Specialty Care, Central & Eastern Europe, Middle East and Africa. In 2012 she joined AstraZeneca Russia as Marketing Director, before being appointed General Manager in 2014. Subsequently, in 2016 Iskra was made Area Vice-President for Russia and Eurasia, before her appointment as EVP, Europe in April 2017, and the later expansion of this role to Europe & Canada in 2019. Iskra has an International Executive MBA in Business and Leadership from the IEDC-Bled School of Management, Slovenia. Please direct correspondence to iskra.reic@icloud.com.

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