ORGANISATIONAL, HOST COUNTRY AND WORK FACTORS INFLUENCING A BRITISH EXPATRIATE'S ADJUSTMENT ON INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL ENGINEERING AND CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

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Increased globalisation within the British AEC sector has augmented the need for transferring UK nationals to manage overseas operations. To be able to perform abroad, expatriates have to harmonise themselves with the conditions prevailing in the host country which includes getting accustomed to living, working and interacting with the host country nationals. This process is commonly referred to as 'cross-cultural adjustment'. To identify key factors influencing adjustment, a qualitative study was undertaken which mainly comprised of comprehensive literature review and interviews with organisational British expatriates within the international AEC sector. The current study explicitly focuses on exploring the role of the organization, host country and work related factors. The findings suggest that success of expatriation does not entirely rest on an expatriate's ability but also on organisational support and assistance that expats receive during and prior to the assignment. Organisational factors like, expatriate selection, job design, training, logistical and social support, mentoring etc. influence various aspects of expatriate adjustment. Cultural distance between the home and host nation salso dictates the level of support required, suggesting that expatriate relocation to less developed, remote or politically unstable regions demands additional support and consideration by the parent company. Further, AEC projects overseas are deeply influenced by the culture of the host country and operate under different set of rules and regulations which potentially affect the sojourners own adjustment to work. This study is of particular relevance to the British AEC organisations, who need to be cognizant of the issues highlighted to make rational and informed decisions when handling international assignments. A better understanding of these issues will actually provide them with valuable direction to formulate or revise strategies to ensure successful international assignments.

Keywords: cross-cultural adjustment, host country factors, international construction, organisational strategies, projects work related factors.

INTRODUCTION

The basic nature of the construction projects along with the growing demand from the emerging economies has lead to the intervention of international organisations mainly from the developing world. Most AEC based organisations transfer (their local staff) constructional professionals like the architects, consultants, managers, and contractors

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etc. to transfer technology across various units (Carrillo, 1994) and manage operations. Achieving success on these projects is an essential issue for such businesses, as it is indispensible for both developmental and functional reasons (Dowling *et al.*, 1998; Strohl and Caliguiri, 1998; Black *et al.*, 1991; Tung and Miller, 1990).

A survey by the global relocation suggests, that international organisations are struggling to find suitable expatriate candidates, assisting expatriates and their families complete assignment and further retaining them (GMAC, 2008). As a result, one of the major challenges facing international organisations is effective utilization of expatriates (Chi and Levitt, 2009). An expatriate has to perform the same set of functions that he/she would on domestic front but in a totally different and complex environment, which is challenged with differences in cultural norms, regulations, routines, professional cultures, institutional work practices, safety standards etc. These differences could also potentially manifest themselves as added costs, delays and even conflicts (Chua *et al.*, 2003; Miller and Lessard, 2001; Orr, 2005). When experienced negatively by the expatriate these emotions get transformed as stress. These cultural differences significantly affect the expatriate's performance and consequently the performance of the company (Hall, 2002). In all these cases, cross-cultural adjustment of the staff posted on international assignments becomes an important aspect. Adjustment is defined as state where variations or modifications become apparent in an individual to accommodate environmental demands (Berry, 1992). Factors influencing cross-cultural adjustment can be related back to; individual, organizational, work related, non-work related and host country factors (Black *et al.*, 1991). Cross-cultural adjustment is also one of the most frequently studied factors in assessing the success of an international assignment (Aycan and Kanungo, 1997; Ones and Viswesvaran, 1997).

This paper is based on literature review and on the viewpoints of the AEC industry representatives. It seeks to understand the adjustment process of organisational British expatriates working within the AEC industry and include Architectural consultants, Engineering consultants, Contractors, Project Managers etc. Organisational expatriates (OE's) in this context are defined as individuals sent by their parent company to manage international assignments for a certain time period which could last from several months to years (Edstrom and Galbraith, 1977). The current study would only concentrate on exploring the impact of host country, work related and organizational parameters on cross-cultural adjustment. Past researches by the same authors have covered individual factors i.e. explored expatriate's skills and competencies influencing their adjustment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross-cultural Adjustment

Cross-cultural adjustment is referred to as the degree to which an expatriate is psychologically comfortable with various aspects of the foreign country (Black, 1988). It involves uncertainty reduction by learning appropriate local behaviours and harmonizing with the local culture (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2009). Among the different phases of expatriation, the subject of cross-cultural adjustment has been excessively studied in the field of international business. Black, (1988) and Black *et al.*, (1991) have identified three facets to an expatriate's adjustment. They include;

Work Adjustment

It involves adapting oneself to the new job tasks, roles and environment. Work adjustment is easier if there are similarities between parent and the host subsidiary in terms of procedures, policies and task requirements (Black *et al.*, 1999).

Interaction Adjustment

This aspect deals with the comfort levels when dealing or interacting with host country nationals at work and non-work situations (Black *et al.*, 1999). It is also suggested that interaction is the most difficult of the three facets of adjustment.

General Adjustment

This third facet deals with overall adjustment to living in a foreign land and adjusting to its culture (Black, 1988). It is comprises of factors such as housing conditions, healthcare, cost of living etc. (Black and Stevens, 1989).

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a part of an ongoing research project carried out in Queen's University Belfast. The study aims to identify various factors influencing a British expatriate's success on international AEC assignments in Asian, Middle-Eastern and the African sub-continents. Expatriate success on an international assignment is measured along the four broad areas that include; his\her adjustment, performance, assignment completion and, job satisfaction (Gabel *et al.*, 2005).

The current study is designed specifically to explore sub set variables of British expatriate's cross-cultural adjustment; an area which has been vaguely researched in international AEC sector. Therefore, information pertaining to this research has been collected using the following techniques;

1-Literature Review

Due to the broad scope of this topic, literature review has been a critical aspect of this research. Research in the area of cross-cultural adjustment in international AEC sector is sparse. Therefore the initial review attempts to explain the concept of expatriate adjustment and identify the related determinants of organisational, host country and work related factors by exploring studies conducted in various sectors of business management, psychology and international human resource management.

2-Interviews with expats in the AEC industry

Eight of the International British AEC organisations agreed to participate in this study. Both, skype and face to face interviews were planned and conducted with twelve British expatriates, where the discussion lasted between 1 to 2 hrs. Three of the interviews were done in-person and rest of them using voice over IP as they were based on-site. Most of the interviews were recorded with prior permission; for the one's that could not be recorded notes were taken and transcribed. The data collected was transcribed and analysed using cognitive mapping and casual loop diagrams. The findings of the literature review and interviews have been drawn up and complied, refer to Table 1.

Organisational Factors	Host Country Factors	Work Factors
Expatriate selection *(Black et al., 1991; Jassawalla et al.,2004; Interview)*	Cultural distance *(Black et al., 1991)*	Implementing safety standards *(Mahalingam andLevitt, 2005; Interview)*
Training key host country nationals *(Jassawalla et al.,2004; Interview)*	Political stability *(Interview)*	Availability of resources *(Interview)*
Cross-cultural training *(Black et al.,1991;Tung,1981)*		Local work practices *(Javernick-Will and Scott, 2010; Interviews)*
Arranging pre-sojourn visits *(Jassawalla et al.,2004;Interview)*		Competence of project parties *(Interview)*
Social and logistical support *(Black et al.,1991;Pinder and Schroeder,1987;Tung 1988; Torbiorn,1982;Interview)*		Job commitment of locals *(Interview)*
Ongoing head office support *(Aycan, 1997;Black et al., 1998; Interview)*		
Organisational culture novelty *(Church, 1982;Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985 and Stening,1979)*		
Mentoring *(Volard et al., 1988; Downes et al. 2002; Mayrhofer and Scullion, 2002; Interview)*		
Job role design *(Black et al., 1991)*		

Table 1: Factors identified from qualitative review and their sources

ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION

After the detailed literature review on cross-cultural adjustment supported by exploratory interviews with British expatriates from the AEC sector, this research proposes a framework for cross-cultural adjustment, which attempts to cluster factors along organizational, work related and host country issues and access the impact of these factors on the three facets of adjustment. Refer to Figure 1 for the hypothetical framework. Following is the discussion on the aforementioned sub-set variables;

Organisational Factors

In this section, the responsibilities and the functions of the parent organisation have been categorized and discussed in pre and during assignment stages.

Pre-Assignment

An organisations investment in strategic planning prior to the assignment is crucial to mitigate any associated uncertainties and increase the fit between the individual selected and the new work environment (Aycan, 1997). The key issues to be considered during this phase include, expatriate selection, training, job role design and pre-sojourn visits.

During the anticipatory phase the most important organizational factor is the criteria and the process of expatriate selection (Black *et al.*, 1991). Most of the researchers in the field of expatriation have long been advocating effective recruitment and selection systems for successful assignments (Tung, 1981, 1982). In spite of this, to date most organisations continue to rely on technical skills and domestic track record as the

criteria for expat selection (Morley and Flynn, 2003; Sparrow *et al.*, 2004) this is true in the case of most international AEC organisations.
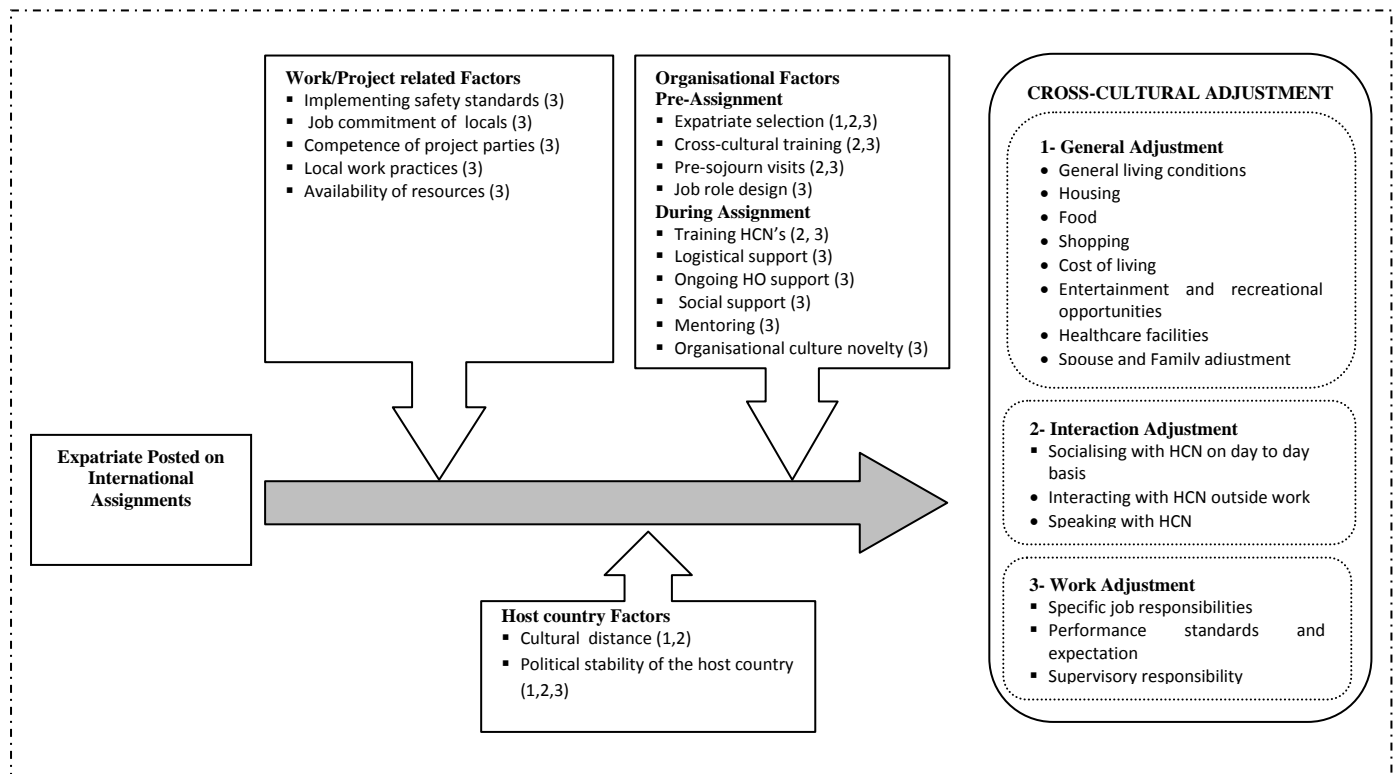
Work/Project related Factors
- Implementing safety standards (3)
- Job commitment of locals (3)
- Competence of project parties (3)
- Local work practices (3)
- Availability of resources (3)

Organisational Factors
Pre-Assignment
- Expatriate selection (1,2,3)
- Cross-cultural training (2,3)
- Pre-sojourn visits (2,3)
- Job role design (3)
During Assignment
- Training HCN's (2, 3)
- Logistical support (3)
- Ongoing HO support (3)
- Social support (3)
- Mentoring (3)
- Organisational culture novelty (3)

CROSS-CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

1- General Adjustment
- General living conditions
- Housing
- Food
- Shopping
- Cost of living
- Entertainment and recreational opportunities
- Healthcare facilities
- Spouse and Family adjustment

2- Interaction Adjustment
- Socialising with HCN on day to day basis
- Interacting with HCN outside work
- Speaking with HCN

3- Work Adjustment
- Specific job responsibilities
- Performance standards and expectation
- Supervisory responsibility

Expatriate Posted on International Assignments

Host country Factors
- Cultural distance (1,2)
- Political stability of the host country (1,2,3)

Figure 5: Framework for Cross-cultural Adjustment on International Assignments
(The numbers in the brackets indicate the numbered facet of adjustment to which the variables relate to)

However, these criteria do not necessarily bestow the individual with the skills like; motivation, inter personal, flexibility, communication etc. which have been perceived to be crucial in cross-cultural situations. Therefore, it would be appropriate to suggest that individuals selected on a wide array of relevant criteria would adapt themselves with ease to all aspects of host nation as against the individual's who are selected merely on the basis of job related criteria (Black *et al.*, 1991).

A survey by Jassawalla *et al.*, (2004) revealed that on completion of the selection process, a pre-sojourn visit should be organised by the company for the expat and his/her family. This is primarily aimed to reduce the extent of cultural shock i.e. to help the individual get a general idea of the host nation and an opportunity to meet his/her future colleagues. Such a visit would also help the expatriates to compare themselves with the locals in terms of vocabularies, expressions modes of conduct etc. and reinforce their commitment to cultural training (Jassawalla *et al.*, 2004).

The firms thus need to develop systems and processes not only to train individuals for expatriate assignments but also to handle cultural diversity (Pande and Krishnan, 2005). Cross-cultural training is one such intervention which escalates an individual's aptitude to deal with and perform in an unfamiliar environment (Tung, 1981).With very little or no cross-cultural training the expatriate is left with little choice and tend to apply the same management styles as in their home country, rather than adopt styles congruent with local norms (Selmer, 1998, 1995, 1995, 2000; Black and Porter, 1991; Lawson and Swain, 1985) and hence increasing the probability for assignment failure. On the other hand holistic/adequate training for the expatriate and his/her family

increases his/her job satisfaction and improves the process of their cross-cultural adjustment.

Another fundamental aspect to be considered during this stage is the manner in which job role of an expatriate is designed (Aycan, 1997). Though it actually manifests itself during the assignment phase, an organisation should address it earlier on by clearly communicating the roles, responsibilities and behaviours to be undertaken by the expatriate (Andreason, 2003; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al, 2005); give some amount of freedom on decision making latitude and avoid placing excessive demands on expatriates. Clarity on task requirement minimises an expatriates uncertainty associated with the work situation and in turn would facilitate adjustment at work (Black 1988, Nicholson, 1984, and Pinder and Schroeder 1987) and role discretion allows individuals to alter their work role to themselves rather than adapting themselves to the situation (Brett 1980; Dawis and Lofqurst, 1984; Nicholson, 1984).

During the Assignment

Organisational support during the assignment includes assistance on logistical and social front. Logistical issues include sorting visas, work permits, housing, organising school for kids, medical insurance etc. Support on logistics would reduce time an expatriate spends these issues and facilitate adjustment to the new work set-up (Aycan, 1997).Whereas social support from co-workers, superiors, peers, sub-ordinates include informational and emotional support on do's and don'ts, working processes and expected behaviours. This kind of support is particularly necessary when organisations cultural novelty is greater i.e. there is greater the difference between the parent organization and the host country subsidiary. In such situations, social support would be of tremendous help to the new entrants in order to mitigate adjustment challenges (Pinder and Schroeder, 1987). An additional aspect of social support would be appointment of a mentor, who could be a senior colleague from the head office, expatriate team member or even a host country national providing insights to the culture of the assigned country (Volard *et al.*, 1988).

An organisation also needs to make a conscious effort to maintain contact between the expatriate and the head office. Ongoing assistance on technical or personal issues gives an assurance to the employee's that they are an integral part of the organization, thus reduce the anxiety and uncertainty associated with 'out of sight, out of mind' fears (Tung, 1988) and accelerates adjustment (Aycan, 1997).

An interesting study by Vance and Pederon (1993) suggest that the host nationals also need to be trained for assignments with foreigners. Training key host nationals helps to reduce ambiguity and conflict of interests between the expatriates and the locals (Aycan, 1997); discrimination faced by the expatriates (Sanchez et al, 2000) and thereby enhances the work and interaction adjustment of the expatriate.

Work/Project related Factors

Each country has its distinct way of handling construction operations, it could range from being either labour to capital intensive (Cunliffe, 1980). Knowledge of working practises of the host nation is important to deliver projects within the specified parameters. This is specifically relevant to constructors, engineers and designers (Javernick-Will and Scott, 2010). Expatriates need to comprehend that the design standards, systems, tools, techniques, skills, work habits and attitudes could be drastically different from that of the home country. For instance, construction projects in developing countries generally are labour intensive and tend to have limited

resources in terms of plants, technology, skills etc. Therefore, getting a particular job done in UK could take approximately two days with all the tools, technology and skilled work force, but the same job in developing countries would take twice or even thrice as long.

Since most international construction contractors are accustomed to implementing high standards of health and safety on construction sites, implementing safety standards was another such issue highlighted during the interviews. These safety standards vary drastically across countries, especially in the developing world where it still continues to be a non- existent concept. Enforcing and implementing such standards takes a lot of effort thereby resulting in considerable delays and additional costs (Mahalingam and Levitt, 2005). Implementing standards also requires is the assistance and co-operation of local workforce, who in most cases perform the operations. For eg: there may be situations which require the local workers to deploy new tools and techniques, work for longer hours or even adhere to health and safety rules. Their commitment towards the project and competence becomes essential as it dictates successful execution and completion of the assignment which eventually decides the success of the expatriate him/herself.

As a result, it becomes essential to take into account the local conditions and working practices even before preparing work programs, designs, specifications etc. If such factors are not taken into account, they could adversely affect the speed and delivery of projects. Factors discussed in this subsection are specifically related to the AEC projects and hence would be distinctive to this industry and would therefore exert a strong influence on expatriate's adjustment to work.

Host country Factors

Cultural distance of the host country refers to the extent of cultural differences between the home and the host country (Shenkar, 2001). It is also referred to as "Cultural toughness" or "Cultural novelty". Church (1982); Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) and Stening (1979) argue that the cultural distance of the host country increases uncertainty i.e. perceived differences between the home and host countries increase an expatriate's doubts and present them with adjustment difficulties. For eg: A western expatriate working in a developing country could have concerns about the living conditions, medical services, educational facilities, less-developed infrastructure, social life etc. Moreover western expatriates consider assignments in India, Middle East, Northern and East African countries as hardship postings as they struggle to cope with tough living conditions, poor amenities, harsh climate and divergent cultural differences (Torbion, 1982).

Further an expatriate's posting in communist or any political unstable regions can put serious constraints not only on the lifestyles of both the expat and his/her family but even on the execution AEC projects. As a result, cultural distance and political situation of the host nation would significantly affect an expatriate's adjustment to general conditions and even to some extent and interaction with the locals.

CONCLUSION

Cross-cultural adjustment is one of the biggest challenges that could derail an expatriate's success (Jassawalla *et al.*, 2004). Therefore the present study was designed to review organisational, host country and work related factors that influence an expatriate's adjustment. The findings of the literature review and exploratory interviews with expatriates suggest that an organisation needs to put in a great deal of

effort in planning and structuring expatriation. Due to the complexity of the adjustment process, expatriates need well-rounded support from the employer and not targeted support (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, international AEC organisations should take up this initiative to invest resources and adopt a support policy not only for the expatriate but also for his/her family members.

Nature of assignment and its location of also dictate the amount of skills and support required. To avoid unnecessary delays and associated cost implications, firms should actively engage to reduce the knowledge gaps, risks and uncertainties associated with international projects (Javernick-Will and Scott, 2010).

Organisation being an ongoing entity is supposed to be around even after the expatriate has departed (Varner and Palmer, 2002). So it would be advantageous for them to understand, appreciate the scheduling of an expatriate's assignment and work towards improving their expatriation policies. Since this study is exploratory in nature, a future empirical study could be designed to establish views of large sample of expatriates.

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