

THE ROLE OF PERSONALITY IN CANDIDATE SELECTION FOR INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS

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ABSTRACT

While global relocation activities and their accompanying costs continue to rise, companies simultaneously report relatively high failure rates for overseas assignments. Soft skills, including personality characteristics, likely contribute to the probability that an individual will adjust to a new culture and to the likelihood of success on an overseas assignment. This paper examines the role the hardiness personality characteristic and the Type A/B behavior pattern play in contributing to the ability of expatriates to adjust to unfamiliar cultures. The discussion suggests that these two personality characteristics should be evaluated when selecting employees for overseas assignments.

Keywords - International assignments, Hardiness, Type A/B Personality, Expatriates, Employee selection, Cross-cultural adjustment

1. Introduction

Conducting business across national borders is no longer something organizations must contemplate to remain competitive sometime in the future. Organizations must face the reality of globalization and adapt to the landscape of international business. In many cases this means sending employees from the parent company overseas to live and work in another country for a period of time (generally two or more years). These employees are referred to as expatriates (Caligiuri, 2000). Employees are sent overseas for various reasons including: filling a need in an existing operation; transferring technology/knowledge to a work site; developing an individual's career through challenging tasks in an international setting; analyzing markets to determine if the company's products/services will attract clients and users; or launching a new product or service (Fox, 2012). In a survey conducted by Mercer in 2008-2009, 243 multinational companies reported a total of 94,000 expatriates, up from 50,000 in 2005-2006 ("Companies increase," 2008). In a survey of its clients, CARTUS (a global relocation firm) reports that overall global relocation activity increased 50% from 2012 to 2014 (CARTUS, 2014). The top three reasons cited for driving the growth in global mobility were an overall company growth strategy, a desire to expand into emerging markets, and the fact that qualified talent was not available in the areas in which these companies desired to expand.

There does not appear to be an imminent slowdown in international assignments as 50% of the companies in the CARTUS survey reported that they expect activity to be higher over the next two years. As a result, companies will continue to contend with the challenges of overseas employment. Fox (2012) reports that the cost of a three year overseas assignment is over one million U.S. dollars and at the same time reports failure rates of 44% for Americans going to the Asia Pacific region and 63% for those in Europe. Hence the cost of choosing the wrong candidate for an international assignment is very high, both for the individual personally and professionally, and for the organization in terms of current and future revenues. Caligiuri, Tarique, and Jacobs (2009) report that personality characteristics are important factors that must be considered when selecting employees for international assignments. Gabel-Shemueli and Dolan (2011) also suggest that soft competencies and personal factors should be assessed during the candidate assessment process. Further, Downes, Varner, and Musinski (2007) report that expatriates themselves downplay functional and technical competence in favor of more tacit personality attributes such as cultural sensitivity, interpersonal skills, and managerial flexibility (p. 18). This paper suggests that evaluating candidates using a two-tiered approach which first assesses technical skills and traditional job-content capabilities (Caligiuri et al., 2009) and then evaluates personality traits including hardiness and the Type A/B personality trait will produce an employee more capable of the cross-cultural adjustment necessary for success on an international assignment.

2. Cross-Cultural Adjustment

Success in an international assignment is measured various ways including determining the employee's level of cross-cultural adjustment, job performance, organizational commitment, and whether or not the foreign assignment was completed (Caligiuri et al., 2009). However the ability to demonstrate leadership and effectiveness in the workplace is likely largely dependent on the individual's ability to adapt to the new work environment and embrace the norms and expectations of the new culture. Cross-cultural adjustment therefore, may be the necessary antecedent to achieving performance goals, remaining committed to the organization, and completing an overseas assignment (McEvoy & Parker, 1995). Caligiuri (2000) and Koveshnikov, Wechtler and Dejoux (2014) define cross-cultural adjustment to the new country and environment as the degree to which individuals are psychologically comfortable living outside their home country. It is a question of whether or not the individual is open to the new culture and can adapt to the new behaviors, norms, and roles (Caligiuri, 2000) or whether he or she continues to act in a manner that is

consistent with the norms of the home country, unable to integrate the new paradigm with the old. In its 2014 survey of 172 mobility managers of multinational companies around the world CARTUS (2014) reports that two of the three primary reasons for the failure of the international assignment (defined by CARTUS as the early return of the employee or failure to reach organizational objectives) were the inability of the family to adapt to the host location (reported by 61% of respondents – up from 44% in 2012), and the inability of the employee to adapt to the host location (reported by 46% of respondents – up from 44% in 2012). This indicates that the inability to adapt to the culture of the host country continues to remain a problem for many international assignees and the organizations that send them overseas.

3. Hardiness

In 1979 Suzanne Kobasa examined the link between stressful life events and the onset of illness. While prior research indicated a positive relationship between the two, her research examined why some individuals could remain healthy in the face of stressful situations. She proposed that those who experience a high degree of stress without falling ill have a personality structure defined as hardiness, which differentiates them from persons who become sick under stress (Kobasa, 1979). Maddi (2006, p. 160) states that “Hardiness is a combination of attitudes that provides the courage and motivation to do the hard, strategic work of turning stressful circumstances from potential disasters into growth opportunities”. Hardiness is a constellation of three personality dispositions including commitment, control, and challenge that help individuals to resist encounters with stressful life events (Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982).

Kobasa (1979, pp. 3-4), Kobasa et al. (1982, pp. 169-170), and Maddi (2006, 160-161) describe each of these three general characteristics and this discussion relies upon their descriptions of the components of the hardiness characteristic. Commitment is the ability of the individual to feel deeply involved in and committed to the activities in their lives. These individuals feel a sense of purpose and find meaning in the events, things, and people in their environment. This sense of purpose prevents them from giving up under pressure and compels them to persevere even in difficult times. They see their purpose as individuals and focus on action rather than passivity. They will remain involved with the people and events in their lives no matter how stressful or difficult they become.

Control is characterized by the individual’s belief that he or she can control the events experienced in life. That is not to say that these individuals believe that they can completely determine the outcomes of events, but they perceive that they can influence results through their own imagination, knowledge, skill and choice. This sense of control leads to more effective coping responses as life events are transformed into something consistent with the life plan. Control also appears to help individuals develop multiple suitable responses to stress. Such individuals also appear to be motivated to achieve in all situations and will use these different response patterns to find meaning in stressful events.

Individuals demonstrating the challenge disposition exhibit a belief that change, not stability, is the norm in life. They anticipate change as an opportunity to grow rather than as a threat to security. Stressful events are viewed as stimulating rather than threatening. They are practiced at responding to the unexpected and value a life filled with interesting experiences. They are prepared to change themselves and grow in the face of the unfamiliar. They have a predisposition to be cognitively flexible which means that they are able to integrate and effectively appraise the potential threat of new situations – even those that may be highly incongruent with their current view of the world. Finally such individuals demonstrate a high level of endurance which is manifested in an ability to persist even in the most challenging environments.

All three of these hardy attitudes are necessary to demonstrate the courage needed to deal with stressful life events (Maddi, 2006). It is further expected that hardiness not only improves health, but it also enhances performance. Hardiness is likely to contribute to "...effectiveness in carrying out difficult tasks, taking a leadership role, being creative, increasing awareness and wisdom, and avoiding rule-breaking and other conduct problems" (Maddi, 2006, p. 161). Those demonstrating the hardiness characteristic will cope with stress through problem solving, not denial and avoidance, and will interact with others by giving and getting assistance and encouragement rather than through competition and overprotection (Maddi, 2006).

It appears evident from this discussion that individuals displaying the hardiness personality characteristic will likely be a better fit for a foreign assignment. The dispositions of commitment, control, and challenge present an ideal temperament for cross-cultural adjustment. A strong sense of commitment means that such individuals see the purpose in the events and people in their lives. The overseas assignment will be viewed as an opportunity and thus they have a strong likelihood of building a deep attachment to both the people they work with, the people they meet outside of work, and the activities in the workplace itself. As they build this attachment they are likely to begin to adopt the norms and behaviors of the new culture in order to build better relationships. Further this attachment will compel them to persevere even when things become difficult – and it is inevitable that there will be stumbling blocks when such a major upheaval of one's personal and professional lives occurs.

A sense of control will encourage the expatriate to feel that he or she can make choices that will ensure that the overseas assignment yields positive results. While an overseas posting may have been unexpected, it is now viewed as within the individual's control to maximize the opportunity to enhance one's career path. It is within the individual's power to determine how this opportunity will be experienced – in a positive or a negative manner. It is expected that the individual will choose to integrate into the new culture as without adapting to the cultural differences it is unlikely that there will be positive outcomes either personally or professionally, which is inconsistent with the desire to achieve.

Finally the disposition towards challenge appears to be a key to cross-cultural adjustment. The changes presented by the foreign assignment will be viewed as an opportunity for growth and the individual is expected to throw him or herself whole-heartedly into the new culture. An individual with this characteristic will be excited by the unfamiliar and take every chance to learn new roles and behaviors and integrate them into his or her current behavior patterns. Rather than fear they should experience exhilaration in the new culture and demonstrate persistence even when faced with cultural challenges.

4. Type A/B Personality Characteristic

Friedman and Rosenman (1974) first described the Type A behavior pattern. The definition of this construct has continued to evolve over the years (Watson, Minzenmayer, & Bowler, 2006), yet it remains associated with three particular personality characteristics: highly competitive attitudes toward achievement, a strong sense of time urgency, and the use of aggression and hostility to cope with a frustrating situation (Lobel, 1988; Watson et al., 2006). Glass (1977) indicated that these three components all demonstrate the strong desire of the Type A individual to exert control over the environment. Type A individuals generally demonstrate a more ambitious orientation to life (Watson et al., 2006). They are characterized as forceful, work-oriented, aggressive, preoccupied with deadlines, ambitious, competitive, highly involved with their jobs, always in a hurry, impatient, and hard-working, (Mahajan & Rastogi, 2011; Rastogi & Dave, 2004; Watson et al., 2006). Type A individuals constantly struggle for the highest amount of achievement in the least amount of time, are action-oriented, and set high performance standards for themselves (Nahavandi, Mizzi, & Malekzadeh, 1992). The Type A is willing to put in whatever hours are necessary in order to achieve the career goals that they have set for themselves (Watson et al., 2006).

It is noteworthy that the Type B individuals are not consistently outshined by Type As. The Type As do not delegate well and often feel overworked. They continually feel a sense of urgency which means that they do not fully consider all of their alternatives before making a decision, and they can be ineffective at complex assignments that require deliberate, careful analysis. They are driven by a need to gain and maintain control which can make them appear and act in a competitive and hostile manner. Their desire to promote their own self-interest drives their decision making (often resulting in less than optimum outcomes) and even their behavior socially (Nahavandi et al., 1992; Watson et al., 2006). Friedman and Rosenman (1974) called this behavior 'joyless striving', resulting in very little pleasure even when difficult goals were met.

On the other hand, Type B individuals are more relaxed and easygoing. They are not preoccupied with a sense of time urgency and can enjoy their time away from work and relax without feeling the guilt of the Type A (Mahajan & Rastogi, 2011; Rastogi & Dave, 2004). For the most part Type B individuals do not experience conflict with either people or time. That is not to say that the Type B individuals are not driven to work hard and achieve success, but they have a more self-assured approach that means each assignment is completed at a balanced pace. The Type B individuals can be "highly productive workers who meet schedule expectations; they simply obtain results in a different manner" (Mahajan & Rastogi, 2011, p. 59). Watson et al. (2006) indicate that it is the Type B individual who is more likely to demonstrate the characteristics desired in the executive ranks. While the Type A individual has the driven personality that often leads to success in middle-level management, it is the more abstract, strategic, relationship-oriented leadership style that is preferred at upper management levels. The Type B is more patient in the decision making process, encourages teamwork, and can see things from a global viewpoint rather than simply from his or her own perspective.

It therefore seems apparent that for those individuals whose behaviors are more consistent with the Type B behavioral patterns, the cross-cultural adjustment process should be more effective. The need for the Type A to control every aspect of the environment will likely be counter-productive in a new culture where he or she is unfamiliar with the behaviors, norms, and roles. The strong sense of urgency and the inability to take the time to consider all of the alternatives before making a decision will likely result in the individual failing to consider interpersonal and cultural factors in the process. Absolute beliefs about right and wrong may preclude the Type A individual from being able to analyze a situation from multiple perspectives (Downes et al., 2007). Understanding the nuances of a new culture takes patience and careful observation which are behaviors inconsistent with the Type A pattern. Hostile and competitive behavior will likely preclude the development of supportive relationships inside and outside the workplace. Spector and O'Connell (1994) hypothesized that there is an impatience-irritability dimension to the Type A construct which is defined as the tendency to become angry and frustrated. This would likely generate more affective outcomes including frustration, interpersonal conflicts, and perceptions of organizational constraints. As there are bound to be many areas where frustration can abound in a foreign environment it seems that these difficulties would be exacerbated for the Type A. Downes et al. (2007) state that individuals who are overly results-oriented may not have the patience for relationship building which is important for success in overseas assignments, particularly in Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. When results are slow to materialize they will have difficulty tolerating the uncertainty which will result in high levels of frustration.

The Type B is characterized as having a global mindset which means that he or she would likely be much more open to exploring a new culture. Ethnocentrism will be minimized as the individual would be more knowledgeable about the new culture and be prepared to make decisions that encompass the perspective of both the home country and the host country. The Type B will take the time to foster relationships which will likely result in a greater understanding of roles and behavioral expectations in and out of the workplace. The strong drive to succeed that has made many Type A individuals successful at mid-level jobs in America, is the very thing that will make these individuals ineffective when adapting to a new culture.

5. Candidate Assessment

It is clear from the literature that assessing candidates for international assignments must go beyond considerations of technical skills and abilities alone (Alon & Higgins, 2005; Caligiuri, 2000; Caligiuri et al., 2009; Downes et al., 2007; Gabel-Shemueli & Dolan, 2011; Koveshnikov et al., 2014; Lii & Wong, 2008; Jassawalla, Truglia, & Garvey, 2004). Consideration must be given to soft skills that influence cross-cultural adjustment. Yet, “Despite recognition by most companies of the costs of assignment failure and the importance of assignments to organizations, there has not been an overwhelming acceptance or use of assessment tools to designate the best employees for assignments” (CARTUS, 2014, p. 35). Fully 58% of the participants in the CARTUS survey do not currently use an assessment tool, and 33% indicate that they do not intend to implement one in the future. The survey also reports that of those that do utilize an assessment, 58% use an informal assessment conducted by the business or HR. This supports Caligiuri et al. (2009) who also indicate that the use of formal or structured international assignment selection is surprisingly low. Where assessments were performed the three factors most commonly evaluated in the CARTUS survey were leadership skills, technical skills, and flexibility/adaptability to fluid circumstances. This latter statement is particularly interesting as the CARTUS survey also reports that the number one reason that participants identified for the failure of an international assignment was that business conditions had changed. While the inability of a corporation to adapt to changing business conditions cannot always be attributed to failures on the part of employees, there does seem to be some room to argue that at least in some cases the selected candidates did not possess the required flexibility/adaptability and were unable to adapt to the changing business conditions in an effective manner resulting in a failed assignment.

Given the informal nature of the majority of these assessments, it leads one to speculate that the driving deciding factor on a candidate’s suitability for an international assignment may be “gut-feel” rather than a more systematic two-pronged process suggested by Caligiuri et al. (2009) that focuses on first job content (tasks, duties, technical skills) and then job context (factors that would predict success on an international assignment). Downes et al. (2007) also recommend a selection process that prioritizes soft traits as key factors when selecting senior managers for overseas posts.

Any organization that chooses to send employees overseas must first generate a pool of employees with the required technical skills (Caligiuri et al., 2009). Strong technical and decision-making skills are a must. Because the experts and support systems that are usually readily available to managers in the home country may be more difficult to access overseas (this may be location dependent due to time changes and internet accessibility), the expatriate should have all the technical skills needed to complete the assignment before he or she arrives in the foreign location. In many cases the expatriate is the boss; therefore no help can be expected from someone further up the hierarchy in the host location (Sullivan & Tu, 1993).

Once this pool has been identified, personality characteristics should be evaluated early in the process to determine which candidate has the potential to adjust to the foreign location (Caligiuri, 2000). While many personality traits have been evaluated for their contribution to cross-cultural adjustment, this research suggests that both hardiness and the Type A/B personality characteristic should be considered in this assessment. Both of these factors can be evaluated through readily available, validated tests. The Personal Views Survey provides a measure of hardy attitudes while the Jenkins Activity Survey is a measure of Type A behavior. It is important to keep in mind that while favorable scores on these tests do not provide a guarantee of successful cross-cultural adjustment, they identify those individuals who are most likely to enter into the overseas assignment with a predisposition for openness to change, adaptability, and a desire to build relationships.

6. Conclusion

Global corporations depend upon expatriates to effectively manage and ultimately lead many operations in foreign countries. It can be challenging for the corporation to find an individual who is the right fit for these assignments. This process is likely to become more challenging as corporations are sending managers to new countries where they have very little experience upon which to draw. In 2001 Goldman Sachs coined the term BRIC to refer to opportunities to invest in the emerging markets of Brazil, Russia, India and China. In 2011 Fidelity employed the acronym MINT to highlight the next cluster of emerging economies: Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey. New clusters will invariably emerge over the next ten years and multinational corporations must be poised with the talent to maximize business opportunities in these nations. Working and living in a foreign location presents significant challenges but these can be managed through a selection process that considers the important role that personality characteristics play in cross-cultural adjustment. Measuring a candidate's predisposition to the hardiness trait as well as the Type A/B personality characteristic will assist in identifying a candidate who is more likely to embrace the opportunity to move overseas and adapt to a new culture, resulting in a positive experience for the expatriate personally and professionally, and ensuring that the organization is able to remain competitive in an increasingly challenging global environment.

7. References

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