Selection for international assignments

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ABSTRACT

The selection of individuals to fill international assignments is particularly challenging because the content domain for assessing candidates focuses primary attention on job context rather than attempting to forecast the ability to perform specific tasks on the job or more generally, the elements listed in a technical job description. International assignment selection systems are centered on predicting to the environment in which the incumbents will need to work effectively rather than the technical or functional job they are being asked to do which in many cases is already assessed or assumed to be at an acceptable level of competence. Therefore, unlike predictors of success in the domestic context where knowledge, skills, and abilities may dominate the selection strategy, many psychological and biodata factors including personality characteristics, language fluency, and international experience take on increasing importance in predicting international assignee success. This article focuses on the predictors affecting the outcome of international assignments and the unique selection practices, which can be employed in selection for international assignments. In addition, this article discusses the practical challenges for implementing the suggestions for selecting international assignees.

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Given that it is the people within organizations who invent and develop products, provide service, market and sell to the public, make decisions, offer vision, and implement strategic business plans, the effective management of human talent is a significant source of competitive differentiation vital to the success of organizations (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2009). For decades, we have accepted the idea that "people make the workplace." In earlier days, we had a simpler definition of the workplace. More recently that workplace has become geographically diverse first spreading from one city to another and now spanning states, regions and countries. Today's dispersion of locations where a company is doing business and the global economy have created a more complex and dynamic environment in which firms manage, deploy, and leverage their human talent. In particular, finding, developing, and deploying culturally astute talent has become a particular challenge for firms globally (Briscoe, Schuler & Claus, 2009; Tarique & Schuler, 2008; Scullion & Collings, 2006; Brewster, Sparrow & Harris, 2005).

The concern that there may not be enough culturally effective individuals filling leadership pipelines today is a serious one (cf., Caligiuri & Tarique, 2009; Littrell, Salas, Hess, Paley, and Riedel, 2006; Scullion & Collings, 2006). When over 1000 CEOs in more than 50 countries were polled in PriceWaterhouseCoopers' 10th Annual Global CEO Survey, "managing diverse cultures" was one of the top concerns they cited for the future. A significant number of CEOs in the PriceWaterhouseCoopers survey indicated that their organizations are challenged by cultural barriers such as cultural issues/conflicts, conflicting regulatory requirements, unexpected costs, stakeholder opposition, and inadequate leadership to manage this increasingly complex environment. This need for people

with greater intercultural competence is exacerbated by the fact that today, more than ever, business professionals are being asked to not only work interculturally but to relocate to host countries as international assignees.

International assignees are nationals of one country who are sent by a parent organization to live and to work in another country. According to the Global Relocation Trends Survey (2008) conducted by GMAC Global Relocation Services, 67% of companies reported an increase in the size of their current international assignee population, compared to 31% in 2004. Furthermore, 68% of these companies told GMAC that they anticipated additional growth in the following year. Finding and selecting the best possible international assignees is a complicated process but absolutely critical to future success of multinational organizations (Scullion & Collings, 2006).

Selecting individuals for international assignments is unique given that the selection systems involve a primary focus on predicting to a job context (working internationally) rather than job content (i.e., tasks, duties, position or title). In reality selection for international work starts where other systems stop in that only those individuals who have a demonstrated competence for the tasks and duties of the job are considered. In essence, international assignment selection attempts to take a group of "qualified individuals" and determine who can effectively deal with the challenges inherent in working with individuals, groups, and organizations that may approach work in a very different way. Not everyone with a proven record of professional success in a domestic context for a given job title will have what it takes to be successful in an international context — even doing the same job with the same job title. Past research has found that many psychological and biodata-type factors, including personality characteristics, language skills, and international experience are important for international assignee adjustment and performance (see Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer & Luk, 2005; Hechanova, Beehr & Christiansen, 2003; Mol, Born, Willemsen, & Van Der Molen, 2005 for meta-analytic reviews) and should be included in an international assignee selection system. The way in which selection is performed may vary from the traditional methods found in a domestic context by including a broader range of selection variables. For example, self-selection may be more appropriate given the importance of family-related predictors of international assignees' success. Similarly, where attitudes toward diverse populations, experience with individuals from different cultures and comfort with not being fully conversant in the host language may be tangentially related to success in a domestic job, these factors are often pointed to as critical for success in foreign assignments.

In this paper we attempt to provide a review of the literature on expatriate selection, and offer some new areas of research. This paper is organized in three sections. The first focuses on the predictors affecting the outcome of international assignments. The second section discusses the selection practices which can be employed in selection for international assignments. In the third section the article concludes with a discussion of the practical challenges associated with implementing selection systems for international assignees.

1. Predictors of success to be included in international assignee selection systems

On the criterion-side of the international assignee selection equation, expatriate management researchers have used a variety of criteria to examine an expatriate's success on assignment such as cross-cultural adjustment (e.g., McEvoy & Parker, 1995), job performance (e.g., Caligiuri, 1997), completion of the foreign assignment (e.g., Shaffer & Harrison, 1998), organizational commitment (e.g., Florkowski & Fogel, 1999), and cross-cultural competencies such as cultural flexibility (e.g., Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006) and cultural intelligence (e.g., Earley & Ang, 2003a,b). As mentioned earlier, several studies have shown that an expatriate's success on a foreign assignment in a new country is largely determined by his or her cross-cultural adjustment to the new culture (Mendenhall, Kuhlmann, Stahl, & Osland, 2002). The focus on cross-cultural adjustment as a criterion of expatriate's success on foreign assignment has been prevalent in the literature since the early 1980s. Since Tung's (1981) finding that an expatriate's inability to adjust to living in the host country was one of the most frequently cited reasons for failed assignments, cross-cultural adjustment is often considered a key dependent variable when considering selection given that adjustment (psychological comfort living and working in another country) is important for all expatriates.

Some researchers (e.g., Cui & Awa, 1992) suggest that it is important to distinguish between cross-cultural adjustment from other measures of an expatriate's success on the assignment such as premature termination of the assignment and job performance. Research by Cui and Awa (1992), for example, indicates that cross-cultural adjustment and effective job performance are correlated to a significant degree, but are not equal. Cross-cultural adjustment is viewed as a process through which an expatriate becomes psychologically comfortable with respect to the job tasks of the foreign assignment (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991). The expatriate's level of cross-cultural adjustment then determines the expatriate's level of performance (Kraimer & Wayne, 2004; Kraimer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001).

A few studies have associated cross-cultural adjustment with an expatriate's premature termination of the assignment (Caligiuri, 1997; Kraimer & Wayne, 2004). Some have suggested that cross-cultural adjustment is a predictor of an expatriate's premature termination of the assignment (e.g., Caligiuri, 1997). Premature termination of the assignment is defined as an expatriate returning to the home country before completing the full duration of his/her assignment (Caligiuri, 1997) and is considered the most basic behavioral criterion used to examine an expatriate's success on the assignment (Caligiuri, 1997; Kraimer & Wayne, 2004). Caligiuri's study found a negative relationship between general cross-cultural adjustment and the desire to terminate the assignment. Similarly, Kraimer and Wayne (2004) discovered that cross-cultural adjustment is positively related to intentions to complete the assignment. Although theoretically it could be argued that expatriates who are adjusted to their work environment are more likely to stay on the assignment, this criterion should be used with caution however (Caligiuri, 1997). Caligiuri (1997) points out that the 'premature termination' criterion can be obscured by other intervening factors such as job and non-work satisfaction, lack of clear goals for how long the assignment lasts, organization withdrawing from the market, and transferring the expatriate to another location.

In meta-analyses of consequents of expatriate adjustment, findings suggest that greater cross-adjustment of international assignees predicted greater job satisfaction, less strain, and higher levels of organizational commitment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Hechanova et al., 2003). Another meta-analysis included expatriate performance as the dependent variable. Looking across these meta-analyses and the expatriate management literature in general, broad three categories of *individual-level antecedents* emerge as predictors of cross-cultural adjustment and performance that would lend themselves to use in international assignee selection systems (Mol et al., 2005). They include several traditional personality variables, language skills, and prior experience living in a different country (see Caligiuri & Tarique, 2006 for a more complete review).

1.1. Personality characteristics as predictors

Extensive research has found that well-adjusted and high-performing international assignees tend to share certain personality traits (e.g., Black, 1990; Caligiuri, 2000a, 2000b; Church, 1982; Dalton & Wilson, 2000; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Mol et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006). Specific personality characteristics have been shown to enable international assignees 1) to be open and receptive to learning the norms of new cultures, 2) to initiate contact with host nationals, 3) to gather cultural information, and 4) to handle the higher amounts of stress associated with the ambiguity of their new environments (Black, 1990; Church, 1982; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Shaffer et al., 2006) — all important for international assignee success. A meta-analysis examining personality as predictors of expatriate performance found that extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were predictive of expatriate performance (Mol et al., 2005). This same meta-analysis also found cultural sensitivity and local language ability to also be predictive.

Within the general research literature on personality, five factors have been identified as a useful typology or taxonomy for classifying the multitude of personality characteristics (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1992, 1993; McCrae & Costa, 1987, 1989; McCrae & John, 1992). Labeled "the Big Five" this set of personality factors include: (1) extroversion, (2) agreeableness, (3) conscientiousness, (4) emotional stability, and (5) openness or intellect. These map nicely to many of the characteristics consistently associated with expatriate success and more broadly success in many jobs performed in home countries and while working in other cultures.

Each of the Big Five personality characteristics relate to international assignee success in a unique way (Caligiuri, 2000a,b; Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997, 1999; Shaffer et al., 2006) and should be included in a selection system for international assignees for different reasons (Van Vianen, De Pater, & Caligiuri, 2005). For example, employees higher in *conscientiousness* are more likely to become leaders, gain status in the eyes of others, get promoted, and earn higher salaries, all clear indicators of successful adaptation and performance. Studies in a domestic context have found a positive relationship between conscientiousness and work performance among professionals in the U.S (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1991; Day & Silverman, 1989).

More broadly the Big Five have been repeatedly shown to be related to many outcomes of critical importance to organizations. Mount and Barrick (1995) linked personality variables to work motivation drawing interesting distinctions between cognitive abilities (what someone "can do") versus personality (what someone "will do") and citing both to be important in the prediction of performance. Hough (1992) and Stewart (1999) demonstrated that an aspect of conscientiousness, dependability, is related to attendance. These and other findings have been used to justify personality assessment as an important indicator of job performance. Further, Borman, White, Pulakos and Oppler (1991) as well as Murphy (1996) support the importance of using personality above and beyond ability in prediction performance.

From the perspective of motivation being a precursor to successful performance, Judge and Ilies (2002) in their meta-analysis show strong support for the links between personality variables and motivation. In this sense there is ample evidence that measuring personality can help to identify the most motivated individuals and therefore help us select individuals with higher probability of success on the job. Finally, in the context of predicting leadership, Hogan, Curphy and Hogan (1994) and Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt (2002) have demonstrated consistent relationships between the Big Five personality dimensions and leader effectiveness. All of these findings have lead to a resurgence of interest in personality as a predictor of performance and inclusion of personality in selection models for all types of employees from senior executives (Thornton, Hollenbeck & Johnson, 2009) to public safety personnel (Cascio, Jacobs and Silva, 2009).

Many of these findings were generalized to the international assignment context (Caligiuri, 2000a; Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997). In a recent meta-analysis, Mol et al. (2005) found that the estimated true population effect size for the relationship between conscientiousness and international assignee success is positive ($\rho = .17$). In selection situations where there are multiple candidates for each position, correlations of this magnitude can have tremendous utility.

Personality characteristics related to relational skills (extroversion and agreeableness) enable international assignees to form stronger interpersonal bonds with host nationals, other international assignees, and those outside the workplace (customers and clients) but critical to job success. Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al.'s (2005) meta-analysis found a positive relationship between relational skills and cross-cultural adjustment ($\rho = .32$). *Extroverted* individuals are able to more effectively learn the social culture of the host country through their relationships with local nationals and, in turn, report higher cross-cultural adjustment (Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Black, 1990; Caligiuri, 2000a,b; Dinges, 1983; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985, 1988; Searle & Ward, 1990). More *agreeable* international assignees tend to deal with conflict collaboratively, strive for mutual understanding, and are less competitive. They report greater cross-cultural adjustment and greater success on the assignment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Caligiuri, 2000a,b; Mol et al., 2005; Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997; Black, 1990; Tung, 1981). In their meta-analysis, Mol et al. (2005) reported that the estimated true population effect size for the relationship of international assignee success and extroversion is positive ($\rho = .17$). Similar results were found between international assignee success and agreeableness ($\rho = .11$).

Emotional stability is also important for success as an international assignee. Emotional stability is an assessment of the universal adaptive mechanism enabling humans to cope with stress in their environment (Buss, 1991). Given that stress is often

associated with living and working in a new and or an ambiguous and unfamiliar environment (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005), emotional stability is an important personality characteristic for international assignees' adjustment to the host country (Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Black, 1988; Gudykunst, 1988; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1984; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985) and completion of an international assignment (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997). Mol et al.'s (2005) meta-analysis reported that the estimated true population effect size for the relationship between emotional stability and international assignee success is positive ($\rho = .10$).

Seeming to be the most intuitively necessary personality characteristic relating to international assignee success is *openness*. For an international assignee, the ability to correctly assess the social environment is more complicated given that the host country may provide ambiguous social cues or very little in the way of insight into cultural expectations (Caligiuri & Day, 2000). Successful international assignees must possess cognitive complexity, openness, and intuition to accurately perceive and interpret the host culture (Caligiuri, Jacobs, & Farr, 2000; Dinges, 1983; Finney & Von Glinow, 1988; Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997). Openness should be related to international assignee success because individuals higher in this personality characteristic will have fewer rigid views of appropriate and inappropriate contextual behavior and are more likely to be accepting of the new culture (e.g., Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Black, 1990; Cui & Van den Berg, 1991; Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wiseman, 1978). Mol et al.'s (2005) meta-analysis reported that the estimated true population effect size for the relationship between openness and international assignee success is positive ($\rho = .06$) however, this relationship was not significant, as the confidence interval included zero. The authors note that "moderated support was found for the relationship of openness" (p. 608) which is consistent with other research. For example, Caligiuri (2000b) found moderated support for openness as a personality characteristic relating to expatriate adjustment, such that greater contact with host nationals was positively related to cross-cultural adjustment when an individual possesses the personality trait of openness. In addition, Mol et al. (2005) did find a positive relationship between international assignee performance and cultural sensitivity ($r = .24$). Perhaps the assessment of openness as traditionally done is overly broad focusing in on a specific correlate of openness, cultural sensitivity, is more appropriate in the context of international assignment selection.

Collectively, these personality characteristics have substantial empirical support and should be included in selection systems designed to forecast success in international assignments (Van Vianen et al., 2005). It is important to note that this type of employee assessment would predict those who will do well adjusting to a cross-cultural job context. This assessment does not, however, predict success in the actual job tasks. This is where we see a departure from traditional selection situations and move to a more sequential process. In many ways this is more similar to person–environment fit approach (French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982) where we are now trying to sort from a group of individuals whom we have already identified as capable of doing the job and are attempting to identify among the capable ones, the few who are best suited for the job considering other characteristics beyond simply task performance. This work has broadened to include person–job fit and person–organization fit and has been shown to be a valuable approach to selection in the work of Cable and Judge (1996 and 1997). In this sense international assignee selection can be seen as a multi-stage process with perhaps the most critical stage being the one that relies most heavily on looking beyond how well someone can do technically to how well the person will fit with the culture.

Researchers have often argued that there are different categories of global assignments. In one of the earliest studies to examine the various types of assignments, Hays (1974) differentiated between: (1) the structure reproducer (one that builds, in the foreign subsidiary, a structure similar to a structure that exists elsewhere in the company, such as a marketing framework or a production system); (2) troubleshooter (with task to analyze and solve a specific operational problem); (3) operational element (those that perform as an acting element in an existing operational structure); and (4) chief executive officer (one that oversees and directs the entire foreign operation). Edstrom and Galbraith (1977) proposed that international assignments can be grouped on the basis of their primary purpose: to fill positions, to develop managers, and to develop organizations. Harzing (2001) found that international assignments can be classified based on the degree of control required by the assignee and suggested another classification: bears (direct personal control), bumble bees (control through socialization and shared values) and spiders (control through informal communication). More recently, Caligiuri (2006) suggested four assignment categories: (1) Technical; (2) Functional/Tactical; (3) Developmental/High Potential, and (4) Strategic/Executive.

As suggested by the above topologies, the literature recognizes that not all expatriate assignments are the same. In the context of expatriate selection, it is important to note that the absolute level of each personality characteristic may be contingent upon the type of international assignment under consideration. For example, the necessary level of relational skills might be important for all international assignees but higher for more senior executives who must network with, persuade and influence host nationals in order to be successful, compared to technical assignees, who may interact with host nationals mostly around tasks with computer systems or equipment. Similarly, there may be a point of diminishing return when it comes to agreeableness. Low levels of agreeableness are associated with lower levels of ability to get along and manage conflict. However, too much agreeableness may be interpreted by host nationals as indicative of a person who has no real conviction or fails to take stands on important issues. Clearly the shape of the relationship between personality variables and success in international assignments must be further investigated for specific jobs and cultures.

Finally, it is important to note that in addition to the Big Five, there are several instruments/measures such as the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire, the Intercultural Readiness Check, the Intercultural Development Inventory and the Global Competencies Inventory — which have been validated and are specifically targeted to evaluating intercultural adjustment capability (see Graf & Harland, 2005 for information on other measures).

1.2. Language skills as a predictor

Many researchers have noted a positive relationship between language skills and international assignee success (Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Church, 1982; Cui & Van den Berg, 1991; Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999). Results from two recent meta-analytic

studies (Mol et al., 2005; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005) show that local language ability is a positive predictor of international assignee success (as generally defined by adjustment; $\rho = .19$ and $\rho = .22$). According to Mol et al. (2005) "more research may be needed on the moderators of this relationship" (p. 609). For example, some researchers suggest that language skills, which are necessary for communication, are critical for cross-cultural adjustment. Others (e.g., Cui & Van den Berg, 1991) suggest that there may be an interactive influence of language fluency (Shaffer et al., 1999): Individual differences such as openness may interact with language fluency to positively influence international assignee success (Cui & Van den Berg, 1991). In other words, one could both speak the host language fluently and know the "correct" behaviors to display, and yet only be superficially immersed in the host culture (Cui & Van den Berg, 1991). Since it would be difficult for the opposite to be true (i.e., that one could be immersed in a culture without language skills), basic language skills should, at very least, be considered as a potential predictor of success. At a minimum, an attempt should be made to select for qualified international assignee with language skills – while for some positions the language skills may be more critical than with others. Once again it is important to conclude that a relationship exists but to further explore the nature of that relationship. It may be that the relationship is one that is "necessary but not sufficient" or that the relationship is asymptotic indicating that at some point more is no longer much better. Depending on the type of relationship, different selection decisions should be made.

1.3. International experience as a biodata predictor

Research has demonstrated that prior international experience can facilitate an individual's ability to function and work effectively in a host country (e.g., Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, & Lepak, 2005; Selmer 2002; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997). An example is the study by Takeuchi et al., (2005), which examined among other things, the effects of international assignees' current assignment experience and past international experiences on cross-cultural adjustment. Based on the study of 243 international assignees and their supervisors, the authors found support for unique moderating effects of past international experiences on the relationship between current assignment tenure and general adjustment as well as specific work adjustment. Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al.'s (2005) meta-analytic results found that prior international experience was a positive predictor of interaction adjustment and work adjustment ($\rho = .13$ and $\rho = .06$ respectively). These studies point to a simple conclusion that individuals who have been in other cultures prior to a work assignment tend to adjust to the assignment better.

From a social learning perspective, the more contact international assignees have with host nationals and the host culture, the greater their cross-cultural adjustment (Bochner, Hutnik, & Furnham, 1986; Bochner, Mcleod, & Lin, 1971; Brislin, 1981). For example, past research has found that having friendships with host nationals greatly improves international assignees' ability to learn culturally appropriate social skills and behaviors (Searle & Ward, 1990). From this perspective, more prior experience with the host culture should produce greater cross-cultural adjustment. On the other hand, the social cognitive theorists (e.g., Bandura & Locke, 2003; Bandura, 1977a,b) contend that prior foreign experience with the host culture is positively related to adjustment provided that the experience does not serve to reinforce previously held stereotypical beliefs or foster negative, unrealistic expectations of the foreign culture. Social cognition proponents agree that there is a direct relationship between foreign experience and cross-cultural adjustment when the experience provides an accurate and realistic representation of the host countries' norms, customs, and values.

Here, as was the case with personality variables, much of the work that is done in international selection has a counterpart in research domestically. The use of biodata as predictors of performance has been on the increase for decades. Historically biodata as predictors of performance come from a primarily statistical approach to understanding relationships between personal history information and job performance. The focus was on simply documenting these relationships and using them as elements of a selection system. Seminal work by Owens (Owens & Schoenfeldt, 1979; Mumford & Owens, 1982) as well as others (Mumford & Stokes, 1991) has helped develop biodata into a viable category of predictors of job performance. Mael (1991) and Guion (1998) have helped structure our approach to developing and using biodata as elements in prediction models.

2. Selection practices for international assignee selection systems

There are three important 'best' practices in the research literature regarding international assignee selection (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2006). The first is the application of *realistic previews* to international assignments to help create realistic expectations during (or prior to) selection. The second is the concept of *self-selection* which enables international assignee candidates to determine whether the assignment is right for his or her personal situation, family situation, career stage and more. The third is traditional *candidate assessment* which would include many of the dimensions identified in the previous section (personality, language skills, and past experience) in a structured organizational selection program noting again that it may actually occur later in the selection process after candidates have been determined to be technically capable of doing the work. This earlier assessment of capability could be done following traditional selection procedures, using supervisory evaluations of past performance or both. Each of these three international assignment selection practices is discussed in greater detail below.

2.1. Realistic previews for international assignments

Preconceived and accurate expectations prior to an international assignment have been shown to influence the international assignment in many important ways (Caligiuri & Phillips, 2003; Searle & Ward, 1990). Studies comparing international assignees expectations prior to going abroad and their actual experience after relocation suggest that having moderately accurate

expectations facilitates cross-cultural adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Weissman & Furnham, 1987). Caligiuri and Phillips (2003) found that providing realistic previews prior to international assignments did not change candidates' interest in possible assignments, but did increase candidates' self-efficacy for an international assignment. This self-efficacy, in turn, could influence the outcome of the international assignment.

Both research and practice suggest that in the selection phase (or prior to it) it is useful for firms to provide some information to assist candidates in making realistic decisions on whether an assignment is right for them and to help them form realistic expectations about a possible international assignment (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; Caligiuri & Phillips, 2003; Tung, 1998). Many firms have pre-selection programs which pair repatriates with international assignee candidates to give international assignees the opportunity to find out how others, who were similarly situated, found the experience (Black et al., 1992; Tung, 1998). Caligiuri and Phillips (2003) have found that self-directed realistic previews are also highly effective in helping international assignee candidates form accurate perceptions of the possible assignment. While realistic job previews have been shown to be useful in international assignment success it is important to note that these findings are consistent with and supported by the broader literature on RJPs, for example, with bank tellers (Wanous and Dean, 1984) and more broadly by Phillips (1998). A word of caution on the overall effectiveness of RJPs is important. There are limiting factors when it comes to RJPs and situations of low choice whether choice is due to such factors as economic slow-downs, higher levels of unemployment, or simply a perception that choice is limited. RJPs rely on self-selection and when alternatives are limited, self-selection becomes less likely. When self-selection becomes problematic the impact of RJPs may be greatly reduced.

2.2. Self-selection

Given that the demographic profiles and personal situations of the international assignee candidates will vary, self-assessment (or self-selection) has been found to be an effective method for sharing realistic assessments in a tailored way (Caligiuri & Phillips, 2003). For example, an unmarried person who is a candidate for an international assignment might have a different set of concerns, compared to a married candidate with a family (Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi, & Bross, 1998). Self-assessment has been found to be useful because global assignment candidates actively self-assess their fit with the personality and lifestyle requirements of the assignment (Caligiuri & Phillips, 2003). Effective self-selection tools enable international assignee candidates to critically evaluate themselves on three dimensions: (1) personality and individual characteristics, (2) career issues, and (3) family issues (including issues of spouses and children). Self-selection procedures, acting as a realistic preview of the assignment, help employees make an informed and realistic decision about a global assignment (Caligiuri & Phillips, 2003). Many firms have found that this self-assessment step fosters the creation of a candidate pool of potential international assignees with higher probabilities of success. This candidate pool can be organized to include the following pieces of information: the availability of the employee (when and to what countries), languages the employee speaks, countries preferred, technical knowledge, skills, and abilities, along with many of the personality and other biodata measures discussed above.

2.3. Candidate assessment

Once the requirements of a given international assignment have been determined, many possibilities exist in terms of how to proceed with candidate assessment. Given the position we have taken, that international assignments must focus on job context, the first step should be to create a pool of individuals who are capable of performing the tasks and duties of the job from a technical perspective. This can be done via traditional predictors of the specific tasks (cognitive ability assessment, job knowledge tests) or more likely via an evaluation made by supervisors and managers who know each potential candidate. Once this step has been accomplished it is important to specify the requirements in terms of what we have referred to as the job context. Foreign assignments will require differential levels of relevant attributes (e.g., language fluency, openness, cooperation, experience with the specific culture, as examples). Specifically, greater emphasis would be placed on personality characteristics (such as sociability and openness) when assessing a candidate for a developmental or strategic assignment — requiring much more host national contact, compared to a more technical international assignment (Caligiuri 2000a,b; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2006). In the best case, a thorough assessment can be conducted through a variety of valid formal selection methods: paper and pencil tests, assessment centers, interviews, behavioral observations, and ratings made by those familiar with the candidate. Although the "domestic" literature is fairly positive about these selection methods, the reality, however, is that most international assignee selection generally happens using the most informal methods — recommendations of peers or supervisors without the benefit of structure behind these recommendations (Brewster & Harris, 1999).

Looking forward to best practice, two aspects of international assignee selection process have shown promise but warrant further investigation. The first is to better understand ways to engage employees early — even before an international assignment is available. The best candidates can build their efficacy for the assignment when their decision-making processes are engaged well before a position becomes available (Caligiuri & Phillips, 2003). The second is to better understand ways to effectively involve the family as early as possible in the selection process. Research has concluded that each family member will influence the assignment positively or negatively (Caligiuri, Hyland, & Joshi, 1998) so their influence should not be disregarded in the assessment phase. It is accepted that the best selection decision will be mutual among the employees, their organizations, and their families. While the best case for international assignee selection is understood, the dynamic interplay among employees, families, and organizations – in terms of international assignment selection decisions – are not yet thoroughly understood and warrant further research.

3. The practical challenges of international assignee selection

The implementation of international assignee selection systems has been surprisingly unstructured and is often inconsistent with firms' stated business goals (Caligiuri & Colakoglu, 2007). The various challenges affecting the implementation of international assignee selection programs are reviewed below. These include the large influence of non-work predictors of the international assignment success (e.g., issues with children and spouse), the differences among firms in their prioritization of international assignment selection, and the generally low utilization of international assignee selection.

3.1. Non-work predictors of international assignees' success

When an international assignee is placed in another country, he or she is pulled up – roots and all – and replanted [e.g., 'removed from the comfortable environment of their parental culture and placed in a less familiar culture' (Sanchez, Spector & Cary, 2000, p. 2)]. In this work-related relocation, significant upheaval is experienced by the international assignee and his or her entire family. Spouses may need to quit their jobs due to the geographic move and the inability to transport their work or may be unable to work once arriving due to limitations on work visas. Children will need to change schools — and begin again in a new school with the associated social and academic upheaval. Homes may be sold or rented and the problems of being far away from a valued asset can result in stress. And all members of the family may be without their familiar supports — friends, extended families, hobbies, pastimes, sports, faith communities, and more. Past research has found that international assignees' family-level characteristics (i.e., family's cohesion, communication, adaptability, and interest in the relocation) are related to family-level cross-cultural adjustment to living in a foreign country — and that family adjustment, in turn, is a mediator of the relationship between family characteristics and expatriate adjustment to working in the host country (Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi et al., 1998).

Given that a family's cross-cultural adjustment affects the expatriate's adjustment to working in the host country, a selection system could include assessment of the family as a whole on the characteristics of family cohesion, adaptability and communication (for more information on various theories and models see Haslberger, & Brewster, 2008; Andreason, & Kinneer, 2005; Caligiuri, Hyland, & Joshi, 1998). Family characteristics, while valid predictors of success are not generally accepted within organizations; most firms wish to respect the privacy of their international assignees and their families. Thus, very few organizations use these family characteristics in international assignment selection systems, favoring the self-assessment and self-selection methods described in the previous section to allow individuals' consideration of the family-related issues which may affect the outcome of their assignment. The important point here is that whether or not the organization does the assessment of family characteristics is not key, what is critical is that a process of evaluating the "readiness" of the family for this assignment must be undertaken. Organizations will do well to help individuals engage in accurate and effective evaluations of family variables that impact success in the foreign assignment.

To help address the influence a family will have on the outcome of the assignment, organizational support programs are extended to the spouses and children of expatriates, including cross-cultural and language training, mentoring, relocation assistance, job placement assistance for the spouse, international club memberships, and the like. These types of programs can be effective and can help the transition from one location to the other. They should be seen as facilitative in terms of adjustment not as a replacement for the assessment of assignment readiness.

In a recent study Caligiuri and Tarique (2009) found evidence suggesting that family diversity (defined as an individual's country of birth with respect to the national backgrounds of his/her parent) predicted global leadership effectiveness. These authors suggest that significant intercultural experiences that can help prepare people to be effective future global leaders may not necessarily need to happen in the workplace — they may have occurred in childhood or young adulthood, as a result of being a member of a multicultural household (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2009). Whether in our personal or professional lives, significant intercultural experiences enable us to learn the nuances of behavior that are expected in another culture compared to our own — helping us to understand our own cultural values and assumptions. When we become sensitive to these characteristics of ourselves, as well as to the norms of behavior in another culture, we begin to develop the intercultural competence important for success in global leadership activities.

Another non-work predictor of international assignees' success that has not been given much attention by researchers is *early international travel experiences* or experiences gained from living outside the country of one's citizenship as a child (Cottrell & Useem, 1993). This form of international experience has been extensively discussed in the "third country kids" (TCKs) literature (e.g., Lam & Selmer 2004; Useem, 2001; Pollock & Reken, 2001; Eidse & Sichel, 2003) which can provide theoretical evidence that individuals, by developing extensive early international experiences, are more likely to have learning or information processing advantages that should facilitate the learning of new behaviors and skills. Early international travel experiences allow TCKs to develop a learning or information processing advantage, which should facilitate the learning of new behaviors and skills. From a social learning perspective when children travel to other countries, they learn behaviors, customs, and norms of that culture through direct experience or through observations of the host nationals' behaviors (Bandura, 1997).

Children with extensive travel experiences in other countries are likely to have developed more comprehensive prior knowledge structures or sets of cognitive maps about people, roles, or events that govern social behavior. Prior knowledge literature (e.g., Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) and cognitive learning theories (e.g., Bower & Hilgard, 1981) suggest that accumulated prior knowledge structures increase both the ability to put new knowledge into memory and the ability to recall and use it. From a biodata perspective, those candidates with greater international experience – perhaps even experience from childhood – may be more effective in the cross-cultural context. Assessing these experiences can add to our ability to predict success in foreign assignments.

Recently, Tarique (2006) examined what draws people to work for firms operating globally. Based on data from 61 potential job-seekers, Tarique (2006) described how recruits differentially seek out job opportunities in firms known for being global players. The study found that individuals' global job pursuit intentions (intentions to pursue a job in an international firm) and attraction to working for a firm operating globally is affected by their early international life experiences and their personal characteristics (e.g., openness to experience and extroversion). In another similar study, Tarique and Takeuchi (2008) examined how the number of international non-work experiences was related to the four facets of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) (Earley & Ang, 2003a,b) and whether the length of international non-work experiences moderated these relationships. Based on data from early career individuals, the authors found that the number of international non-work experiences was positively related to all four facets of CQ. Furthermore, the results showed that the number of international non-work experience had a stronger, positive effect on meta-cognitive and motivational facets of CQ for individuals with shorter length of international non-work experiences while it had a weaker effect for individuals with greater length of international non-work experiences. Recently Tarique (2009) attempted to expand on Tarique and Takeuchi's (2008) ideas to examine how international travel experience facets, that have not been examined in the literature before (e.g., variety, cultural novelty, host national contact), interact to effect three forms of dynamic cross-cultural competencies (cultural flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, ethnocentrism). Consistent with prior research on international experiences, Tarique's (2009) results show discriminant validity for the different "operationalizations" of the international travel experience construct and highlight the importance of including cultural novelty and host national contact as measures of international travel experience to enhance understanding of these variables' impact on dynamic cross-cultural competencies. More specifically, Tarique's (2009) study found that as variety of international travel experience increased, cultural flexibility was greatest among participants who had high cultural novelty and high host national contact. In contrast, as variety of international travel experience increased, ethnocentrism was greatest among participants with low cultural novelty, and low host national contact. The results from the three studies suggest that companies should consider recruiting early career individuals with the propensity for later international career growth. Indeed these findings provide more evidence that additional biodata-type predictors may be developed and used in selecting international assignees.

3.2. Strategic importance of international assignments

Firms differ on the extent to which international assignees are central to their global business strategy and, in turn, whether selection for international assignments is a strategic priority. The relationship between international assignees and an organization's business strategy can be viewed from the subsidiary staffing perspective (e.g., Tarique, Schuler, & Gong, 2006; Gong 2003; Harzing, 2001). Schuler Dowling & De Cieri (1993) proposed that MNEs maintain an appropriate subsidiary staffing composition (mix of parent country nationals, third country nationals, and host country nationals) in order to balance the needs of autonomy, coordination, and control, and thus, enhance global competitiveness, flexibility, and learning. Furthermore, the differential use of expatriates (e.g., parent country nationals and third country nationals) has an impact on the performance of the subsidiary (Colakoglu, Tarique & Caligiuri, in press; Gong, 2003) depending on the fit between the mix of parent country nationals and third country nationals and the subsidiary's internal and external environment (cf. Schuler and Jackson, 2005).

In an effort to define more precisely the relationship that specific internal (e.g., business strategy) and external environmental factors (e.g., country culture) have with subsidiary staffing composition, a number of theories and models have been proposed (e.g. Harzing, 2001) that suggest some ways in which these variables interact. Some theories and models describe and explain determinants of subsidiary staffing composition (e.g., Tarique et al., 2006), and some conceptually link the influence of subsidiary staffing composition to various measures of subsidiary financial performance (e.g., Gong 2003). Gong (2003) proposed a model that conceptually links the influence of subsidiary staffing composition to subsidiary financial performance. Based on the insights of organizational learning and social identification theories, he explained the theoretical underpinnings for how heterogeneity of staffing composition affect subsidiary financial performance. Tarique et al. (2006) attempted to expand on Gong's (2003) ideas to propose a model that integrates the person–environment (P–E) theory and the literature on international human resource management to provide a better understanding of how environmental contingencies influence MNE subsidiary staffing composition. They provided a theoretical framework for understanding the important role that a MNE's environment plays in the determination of subsidiary staffing composition. Tarique et al. (2006) argue that a fundamental issue for MNEs is to address the subsidiary staffing composition that supports the intensity of integration required to balance the dual needs of standardization and localization. The concept of intensity of integration is based on the assumption that a fundamental issue MNEs face in their attempts to develop a competitive advantage is to coordinate worldwide subsidiaries in a manner that satisfies the dual need for standardization and localization (e.g., Schuler Dowling & DeCieri, 1993). Intensity of integration can be visualized on a continuum ranging from very high to very low. A very high intensity of integration implies a strong need for coordinating the worldwide subsidiaries, whereas a very low intensity of integration reflects a strong need to decentralize the various subsidiaries. Tarique et al. (2006) specify that environmental contingencies influence the intensity of integration.

More recently, Caligiuri and Colakoglu (2007) examined the relationship between international assignees and MNE strategy in terms of geographic dispersion and multiculturalism (Adler, 2002). Geographic dispersion is the extent to which a firm is operating across borders and must coordinate operations across borders in order to be effective. Multiculturalism is the extent to which the workers, customers, suppliers, etc. are from diverse cultural backgrounds and must coordinate the activities of people from diverse cultures in order to be effective. In leveraging both geographic dispersion and multiculturalism, MNEs must achieve a dynamic balance between the needs to be centralized (e.g., global), or tightly controlled by headquarters, and the need to be decentralized, or operating differently across diverse locations (multidomestic) (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989). Providing support to the global versus

multidomestic typology, Caligiuri and Colakoglu (2007) found that firms differentially assign strategic international assignees to host locations based on their firm-level international management business strategies. For example, organizations operating with a global strategy (where it was important to create synergies across boundaries), international assignees have a central role in the implementation of that strategy (Bonache & Brewster, 2001). Over all, the literature on strategic global staffing suggests that given the strategic importance of international mobility for global strategy firms, their selection of candidates *should be* a more scrutinized process compared to firms operating with a more localization-oriented strategy.

Likewise, within an organization, certain international assignees are of greater strategic importance than others. For a given firm, a British Vice President of Operations working in Brussels, a Swiss Systems Engineer working in Singapore, a French Management Trainee working in Canada and a German Electrical Technician working in China are all on international assignments. Their job descriptions, however, are very different in terms of the technical skills and language skills needed to perform their jobs, their hierarchical levels within the organization, their educational backgrounds, the durations of the assignments, and the like. The differences among international assignments have implications for the way organizations select and place these individuals (Caligiuri & Paul, in press). International assignees in more strategic, boundary spanning or networking roles may require a more rigorous selection protocol around the dispositional characteristics affecting interaction and affiliation, compared to those who have more technical roles requiring little interaction with host nationals.

3.3. Role of selection in developing international work skills of employees

Many multinational organizations are sending employees on international assignments for the purpose of developing global competence or cultural agility by building their knowledge of the worldwide market, developing cross-cultural understanding, and/or the ability to speak a second language at work. The extent to which development is formally recognized as an expected outcome of an international assignment will vary greatly depending on type of assignment. Despite the plethora of research advocating the use of international assignments in global leadership development, the current scholarly research has one major deficiency; the literature assumes that everyone benefits equally from the international experience — generally ignoring the fact that people benefit differently and sometimes not at all from the same training or development experience (Caligiuri & Tarique, in press, 2006; Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1999).

It is important to understand who will benefit the most from an international assignment if development is a stated goal for the assignment. There is evidence from the domestic training and development literature that personality traits are related to learning outcomes (e.g., Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001; Barrick & Mount, 1991). Barrick and Mount's (1991) meta-analysis, for example, supported the validity of personality for predicting training performance. Barrick & Mount found that the personality traits of conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness were related to training proficiency. In another example, Salgado's (1997) meta-analysis of 36 studies found that the personality traits of openness and agreeableness were valid predictors of training proficiency. This stream of research has shown that, in general, individual attributes such as motivation to learn (e.g., Colquitt, LePine & Noe, 2000) have a relatively constant effect on the acquisition, retention, and reproduction of learned capabilities. Therefore, through international assignment selection, it is possible to identify those individuals with the requisite individual characteristics to benefit from developmental assignments (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2009, 2006; Caligiuri, 2000a; Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1999). For example, those with affiliation oriented personality characteristics will be more likely to gain culture-specific knowledge on assignment because they are more likely to spend time with host nationals, learning behavioral responses for the given host country. In a recent study Caligiuri and Tarique (2006) examined the ways in which organizations develop successful global business leaders. Based on data from over two-hundred global leaders, they found that high contact cross-cultural leadership development experiences and the leaders' personality characteristics were predictors of effectiveness in global leadership activities. Testing hypotheses based on social learning theory and the contact hypothesis, the results showed that extroversion moderated the relationship between high contact cross-cultural leadership development experiences and effectiveness on global leadership activities. In other words, highly extroverted leaders with a greater number of high contact cross-cultural leadership development experiences are the most effective on global leadership activities. These studies point to promising predictors for achieving the desired goals associated with international assignments and argue for a more structured, assessment oriented approach to identifying strong candidates.

3.4. Lack of utilization of selection for international assignments

Despite the strategic importance of international assignees and their performance while working in other countries, firms generally do not differ in their overall use of formal selection systems according to their business strategies: Across all firm-level strategies, the use of formal or structured international assignment selection is surprisingly *low* (Caligiuri & Colakoglu, 2007; Harris & Brewster, 1999). The lack of formal international assignee selection systems in firms is, in part, related to the role the Human Resource (HR) function plays in the placement of international assignees. In most firms, HR will discover an international assignee has been selected after the selection has occurred. Said another way, HR while being in good position to help with selection, is not often asked to participate. Rather, the role of HR becomes administrative (securing visas, managing the relocations) or risk managing (supplying cross-cultural training, language training, destination services, and other support practices).

The role of HR in international assignee selection is changing slowly as organizations recognize the strategic importance of international assignees. Business leaders almost always acknowledge the role of selection immediately after a high-profile placement goes awry, damaging host country business in some significant way. The strategic integration of international assignee

selection is bound to increase as the need for globally effective individuals increases. It would be best if this progress was made as a result of strong evidence of efficacy and the potential to make correct selection decisions rather than fueled by repeated failures.

3.5. Conclusion

Most multinational companies acknowledge that the wrong person in an expatriate assignment can result in poor individual job performance, early repatriation, anxiety or other emotional problems, and personal and professional upheaval for the individual and for the accompanying family members. Additionally, failure in the assignment often carries with it far reaching organizational consequences both home and abroad. With the risks so high, expatriate selection (designed to identify who will have the greater likelihood of success) is critical.

Much is known regarding success factors and many selection programs have been created that help identify the candidates best suited for international assignments. Many of the factors underlying success have been specified in sections of this paper and can be placed in an assessment program across a variety of organizations and foreign assignments. Additionally, we know of many factors that can support the selection program once individuals have been identified. Clearly doing something proactively is much better than allowing events to take place without structure and forethought. Much of what should be done is outlined in this paper.

One important consideration, as yet unstated, is that in many selection circumstances the efficacy of an expatriate selection program is challenged when transnational firms report (as they often do) that there are not enough people to fill current expatriate assignments. The natural reaction, in this case, is to believe that expatriate selection would not apply. However, ignoring proper selection is extremely short-sighted given the risks to the firm and the individual if the global assignment is unsuccessful. This reaction is especially limited given that when selection is thorough, firms cast wider nets for possible candidates and generally find multiple candidates with a higher probability of success. These comprehensive selection systems generally have four distinct phases including self-assessment (and possibly self-selection), the creation of a technically qualified candidate pool, selection that focuses on a host of variables including personality and biodata, and placement into positions consistent with the assessments. The placement in a host country will be most successful when agreement is mutual among the candidate, the candidate's family, the sending unit, and the host national unit. Strategic and logistic support prior to and at arrival will facilitate success.

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