

Full Length Research Paper

“Person culture fit” as an approach for better adjustments of expatriates to new cultures: A case study of China

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It has been revealed from the many studies and literature available that the human factor or the human resource is a particular resource that can really create a difference for an organization. Increase in the internationalization of organizations and the emerging concepts, like globalization, is continuously promoting the transfer of workforce abroad and is increasing the cross cultural interaction of people in organizations. This mobility of workforce across borders and cultures is creating availability of the best workforce for the organizations but at the same time, it is also giving rise to new problems, which is the inadequate match of personalities to their positions, and to new cultures, and is resulting in failure or poor performance. As such, expatriates are confronted with both job-related and personal problems by working in a foreign environment with different political, cultural and economic characteristics. Organizations are faced with a challenge regarding creation of adjustability of the expatriates to the foreign country or to the environment of the host country. This challenge can be overcome by using person environment fit phenomenon, which seems to be providing a new type of person environment fit that can create the better adjustment between the person (expatriates) and the new culture, both in and outside the organization in the host country or in the foreign country.

Key words: Expatriates, person environment fit, culture, globalization, mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Increased mobility of the workforce across the borders and culture of a country is creating availability of the best workforce for the organizations, and at the same time, it is also giving rise to new challenges, which is the inadequate match of personalities to new cultures and which result in failure or poor performance (Alam and Hoque, 2010). Fit between the workforce and international cultures is required for better adjustments between the person (expatriates) and either the host country, or the foreign country environment that has the person-culture fit. Evidently, the successful expatriate assignments and successful cross-culture adjustment is important for the success of expansion of the organizations

in the international market (Bennet et al., 2000). Like other countries, China is also influenced by globalization. The fast and rapid development of the economy of China, it requires expertise in different area and therefore, the number of foreigners in China is increasing in two ways: one is, the people who are coming to China on their own for business jobs and other purposes; and the other type is the experts that are invited by the Chinese organizations. When someone is out of his/her native country, he/she has to come across different cultures that can create difficulties in adjustments due to the differences in the native and host national countries. A similar case is seen for the people coming to China. Here, the people have to face and live with the culture that may not be entirely new for some people, but in all respects, may be a totally different one for some others. This very same fact lies behind the aim of this paper. This paper

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is about extending the person environment (PE) fit theory to expatriates adjustments in international environment, and creating a fit between expatriates and international environment for better and successful performance. Also, it explores a new type of person environment fit specifically studied in China, based on a factor that can create important person environment fit, that is, a fit between a person and its culture. In this paper, the importance of different aspects of culture in the adjustments of expatriates and the impact on their performance has been studied. As a result of differences in cultures, they face problems in their adjustments to these new cultures. Based on this phenomenon, we suggest that, besides all other types of the person environment fit so far studied, there can be another important type of fit (that is, person culture fit), which should be considered for the better adjustment of the expatriates working outside their native countries (Vögel and Vuuren, 2008; Li, 2010). For this purpose, the literature review is done in the area of person environment fit, expatriates and culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW: EXPATRIATES AND PERSON ENVIRONMENT FIT

The concept of PE fit is grounded in the interactionist theory of behavior (Chatman, 1989; Muchinsky and Monahan, 1987). The interactionist perspective has a fairly long theoretical tradition, beginning with Lewin's (1951) proposition that behavior is a function of the person and the environment. This view asserts that neither personal characteristics nor situation alone adequately explains the variance in behavioral and attitudinal variables, but the interaction of personal and situational variables accounts for the greatest variance. The topic of PE fit has been studied mainly in the Western context. A good fit is the mutually offsetting pattern of relevant characteristics between the person and the environment (Muchinsky and Monahan, 1987). PE fit is considered to be an overarching concept under which different types of PE fit have been identified. The most relevant distinctions to the management of organizations are person-job (P-J) fit, person-group (P-G) fit and person-organization (P-O) fit, which somewhat correspond to individual, group and organizational levels of PE fit. P-J fit can be defined as the match between knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) of the individual and the requirements of the job, or the desire of the individual and the attributes of the job (Edwards, 1991). P-J fit is the traditional concept of fit that has dominated research and practice in employment selection in the Western context. Thus, P-J fit has a long history of providing a structure that produces valid and reliable selection results (Werbel and Gilliland, 1999). The P-O fit can be broadly defined as the compatibility between individuals and organizations. The roots of P-O

fit can be traced back to Schneider's (1987) Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) framework, which suggests that individuals will seek out organizations that are attractive to them, they will be selected to be a part of the organization and will leave when the organization is no longer attractive to them. The P-G fit can be defined as the match between individuals and workgroups (that is, coworkers and supervisors), in that it is a relatively new construct compared to the other two types of P-E fit. Realistic job previews are helpful in creating person environment, particularly person job fit (Tak, 2007; Bauer et al., 2007). Evidences are available about the positive relationships between job attitudes and PE fit (Carson and Mowseian, 1993; Kieffer et al., 2004). As such, the consequences of the PE fit research on PE fit generally supports the idea that a high level of PE fit is related to a number of positive individual and organizational outcomes. First, being consistent with the traditional view that P-J fit is the most fundamental in personnel selection implies that the empirical research shows that a high level of P-J fit has a number of positive outcomes. Although, studying job attitudes remained the area of major focus in person environment contexts (Ostroff et al., 2005), researchers have focused on areas of PO and PE fit (Lauver and Kristof-Brown, 2001). Concerning the relationship between PE fit and its consequences, job satisfaction, organizational commitments, quitting intentions and performances have been studied by Kristof-Brown et al. (2005). Researches on personnel selection demonstrated that validated and structured procedures for determining P-J fit have led to more effective selections of employees in comparison to unstructured techniques (Buckley and Russell, 1997). In addition, job satisfaction, low job stress, motivation, performance, attendance and retention are positively affected by demands-abilities of P-J fit (Edwards, 1991). Secondly, the empirical research shows that a high level of P-O fit is related to a number of positive outcomes. P-O fit was found to correlate with work attitudes, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Boxx et al., 1991; Bretz and Judge, 1994; Chatman, 1991), and was found to predict the intention of quitting and turnover as well (Chatman, 1991; O'Reilly et al., 1991; Vancouver et al., 1994). Not many studies have been conducted on P-G fit because it is a relatively new concept; thus, Kristof-Brown and Stevens (2001) examined the effect of P-G fit as goal congruence on individual outcomes. They found that P-G fit, in terms of perceived performance goals, elicited greater individual satisfactions and contributions. For newcomer employees, Lee and Lee (2006) emphasized that person environment fit is positively related to job satisfaction.

So far, the person environment fit theory and its components do not include the cross cultural forces that can create the misfit between the environment and the person, which thus lead to incomplete and unsuccessful

assignment by expatriates in the international perspective. An expatriate is a person, temporarily or permanently residing in a country and culture, other than that of the person's upbringing or native residence. Expatriate failure is commonly defined as the early return or departure of expatriates. There are lots of factors discussed by the researches that create difficulties in the adjustability of these expatriates in a new environment. Creating the best fit can be a foundation for the successful achievements of the expatriates in the international assignments. Major factors that affect the performance during international assignments are organizational policies and practices, job characteristics and tenure of stay in host country, employee involvement and job satisfaction (Locke, 1976; Earl, 1993). Early emphasis on the match of expatriates to their assignments focused on the need for selecting those who are technically proficient, while it neglected relational skills (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985; Tung, 1981). As it is now commonly acknowledged in international HRM, technical proficiency is a necessary but not sufficient condition for expatriate effectiveness (Tung, 1984). Therefore, as technically proficient expatriates continue to fail, the HRM focus has expanded to include realistic job previews and cross-cultural training, with both academic and practitioner-oriented literatures now emphasizing the need for these pre-assignment processes. The very basic reason behind the failure of expatriates in their assignments is the miss fit between them, and as such, the culture to overcome this cross cultural training can be used. Expatriates fail to complete the full term of their overseas assignments or have marginal performance during overseas assignment because of cultural adjustment. While working outside one's home or national culture, people come across different types of cultures within and outside their organization, in that national cultures differ mostly at the level of basic values while organizational cultures differ mostly at the level of the more superficial practices: symbols, heroes and rituals (Hofstede, 1994). Thus, harmony with the culture is required for managerial effectiveness (Daniel and Michelle, 2004). Ostroff et al. (2005) projected that newcomer information-seeking and organizational socialization tactics influence newcomer adjustment, which in turn influences a number of outcomes (for example, performance and turnover). However, some other researchers like Choi and Yoo (2005) have explained the positive relationship between turnover intentions and PE fit.

If organizations consider these PE fit theories by including culture component to it, they can create the best fit for the expatriates in new cultures. While working internationally, employees come across two types of new cultures: one is organizational and the other is the culture of the host country. These culture factors, like social setup, host national attitudes and language can also facilitate or act as a hurdle in the expatriate's adjustability.

This adjustability can be improved by using a phenomenon of person environment fit. As mentioned earlier, PE fit components are used to create the best match or fit between the selected employees and the environment of the organization, which is same with the case for the expatriates. However, the main reason behind the poor performance and the early return of the assignees without completing their assignments is also poor fit or match between the organization and the employees. The major reason is the cultural difference; so, we can propose that there is another component of the person environment theory (that is, person culture fit) that can help expatriates in better fitting themselves into the new cultures and performing their assignments better in their maximum capacity (Alam, 2009). Beside generalization of the PE fit implications within the organization, the same phenomenon can be used for the better adjustment of the expatriates by considering the "culture" as another component of the PE fit, in order to have their best performance in the international assignments. Therefore, it can be extended that the PE fit components, with the new proposed fit type theory "Person culture fit", can better enhance the adjustment of the expatriates to the new environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study selected different international organizations in China as sample for finding the importance of different cultural aspects, which can influence the adjustability of expatriates to new cultures and find whether these aspects influence the performance of the expatriates or not. A person culture fit can be defined as the compatibility or match between the person and host country culture. In order to create better adjustment of the expatriates to international assignments, the theory of person environment fit can be extended by considering and incorporating the new component "culture" to this theory. The major elements of culture are material culture, language, aesthetics, education, religion, attitudes and values, and social organization. Employees, before departing, can be provided pre-transfer training for performing and living in a new environment to have person culture fit in host countries besides having person job fit and person organization fit. This study supposes that the following factors can predict or create the person culture fit:

- i. Social setup of host country.
- ii. Interaction with the host nationals.
- iii. Fluency in the host country's national language.

The three categories are further divided and presented in Table 1. The population and sample used for this study was the international workforce in Chinese based organizations or other international organizations in China, and the survey instrument was a questionnaire. To test the importance of these three factors, a small survey comprising 150 samples was conducted, out of which 72 people responded. A total of 12 variables were included in the questionnaire and a 1 to 7 rating scale was used to check the present situation of life of expatriates in the host country (where 1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = not satisfactory, 4 = neither satisfactory nor dissatisfactory, 5 = adequate, 6 = very good, and 7 = excellent). For describing the intensity of importance of different cultural factors in adjustment to culture and effect on performance, the relationship

Table 1. Categories of person culture fit.

Social setup of host country	Interaction with the host nationals	Fluency in the host's national language
Living conditions in general	Socializing with host nationals	National language speaking
Housing condition	Interacting with host nationals on the work	National language reading
Food	Interacting with host nationals off work	National language writing
Shopping		
Cost of living		
Entertainment		
Health care facilities		

Table 2. Demographic information of the selected sample.

Item		Frequency
Gender	Male	54
	Female	18
Age	31 or less	22
	31-40	31
	41-50	14
	51-60	5
Education	Bachelor	21
	Master	46

between these cultural variables and job performance was studied.

RESULTS

Demographic statistics

Table 2 presents the demographic distribution of the respondents regarding gender, age, education, marital status, previous job experience, family, source of assignment and job type. It shows the gender of respondents, where 54 (75%) out of the total 72 are male and 18 (25%) are female respondents, while for age distribution of the respondents, the maximum frequency is 31, which is in the 31 to 40 years age group. However, for the educational background of the respondents, 21 are with bachelor degree, 46 are with masters and 5 are doctorate degree holders (Table 2).

Person culture fit description

Items considered in studying the culture of the host country are discussed and these items can be characterized in three major categories: social setup of the host country, interaction with the host nationals and fluency in

the national language of the host country, as shown in Table 3, while Table 4 shows each item that is included in these three categories. Moreover, the mean and STD deviation of the considered items are shown in Table 3. It shows the description of the three categories and the items included under these categories with their mean and STD deviation and the combined mean of the social setup of the host country, interaction with the host nationals and fluency in the national language, as 5.2183, 4.6343 and 3.9167, respectively. Among these, the social setup of the host country has the highest mean of 5.2183, while that of fluency in national language is lowest at 3.9167. Considering the means of the individual items in these three categories, among the social setup of the host country, the living conditions in general have the highest mean which is 5.5833, while the cost of living has the lowest mean value of 4.3889. For the second category which is interaction with the host nationals, the interaction with host nationals at work and the interaction with host nationals off work have the highest and lowest mean which is 4.8889 and 4.4722, respectively. In the last category which is fluency in the host country's language, national language speaking has the highest mean of 4.4028, while national language writing has the lowest mean of 3.9167.

Table 3 shows the frequency of the response for each

Table 3. Descriptive analysis.

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
Social setup of host country	5.2183	0.80347
Living conditions in general	5.5833	1.11013
Housing condition	5.3472	1.22371
Food	5.7778	1.07758
Shopping	5.6250	1.29395
Cost of living	4.3889	1.38966
Entertainment	4.9583	1.60490
Health care facilities	4.8472	1.58033
Interaction with the host nationals	4.6343	1.51689
Socializing with host nationals	4.5417	1.71930
Interacting with host nationals on the work	4.8889	1.52496
Interacting with host nationals off work	4.4722	1.75204
Fluency in host national language	3.9583	2.35565
National language speaking	4.4028	1.89633
National language reading	4.2500	2.21868
National language writing	3.9167	2.61496

Table 4. Individual item frequency.

Item	Poor (%)	Average (%)	Good (%)
Living conditions in general	6.94	9.72	83.33
Housing condition	9.72	11.11	79.17
Food	2.78	8.33	88.89
Shopping	6.95	12.50	80.56
Cost of living	26.39	22.22	51.40
Entertainment	17.56	19.44	62.49
Health care facilities	23.62	13.89	62.50
Socializing with host nationals	25.00	15.28	59.72
Interacting with host nationals on the work	18.06	12.50	69.45
Interacting with host nationals off work	29.17	11.11	59.72
National language speaking	41.67	5.56	52.77
National language reading	45.83	6.94	47.23
National language writing	50.00	4.17	45.83

item mentioned on the 1 to 3 rating scale, where 1 stands for poor life; 2, average life and 3 describes the life in the host culture. "Good" describes the satisfactory status of life in the host country, while the poor shows dissatisfaction about life in the host country.

Individual item frequency

Here, the frequency of the individual items studied in the culture of the host country is shown. Initially, in the questionnaire, the study used a 1 to 7 rating scale (where 1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = not satisfactory, 4 = neither

satisfactory nor dissatisfactory, 5 = adequate, 6 = very good, and 7 = excellent), but the study grouped these 1 to 7 rating responses into 3 categories, that is, poor, average and good. The study has combined the 1 to 3 response as poor, 4 as average and 5 to 7 as good life status in the host country as shown in Table 4.

The relationship between person culture fit and person environment fit

Table 5 shows that out of the three major categories of the cultural setup of the host country, the interaction with

Table 5. The person culture fit.

Factor	R	R ²	ΔR^2	F	ΔF	Std. coef.
Interaction with the host nationals	0.397	0.158	0.158	13.130***	13.13022954	0.562
Fluency in host national language	0.537	0.288	0.130	13.97777254***	12.64163859	-0.397

Table 6. The relationship between person culture fit and organization culture.

Factor	R	R ²	ΔR^2	F	ΔF	Std. coef.
Social setup of host country	0.246	0.060	0.060	4.495*	4.495	0.246

host country nationals and fluency with host nationals are significantly related to the person culture fit, and these two can forecast the person value scores.

Table 6 shows that there is a significant relationship between person culture fit and organization culture; therefore, it can be said that a good match between the person and host national culture will result in better adjustments of expatriates to the international organizational culture.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From the results of this study, we conclude that the interaction with the host nationals and fluency in the national language of the host country can forecast the person culture fit and can be helpful in the adjustments of the expatriates to the host country's culture and therefore will be useful in avoiding cultural shock to the expatriates. This type of fit can be called the person culture fit. The study can assume from the literature available that like all other types of the person environment fit, this type of fit will also be having a positive impact on performance, especially for the expatriates, and will lead to successful international assignments. To have a better performance in international assignments, these employees should be having fit and adjustment not only within organizations, but with the national culture of the host country as well.

The results explain that most of the respondents assert that the adjustability to the social setup, interaction with host nationals and proficiency in national language of host country is important for the adjustments to the new cultures. The percentage of people who responded positively to the high importance of adjustments to new cultures and who felt that this can be influential on their performance was much higher than those who felt otherwise. To have a better performance in international assignments, these employees should be having fit and adjustment not only within organization, but with the national culture of the host country as well. People of different nations have different values or norms that

influence their attitudes and priorities on issues relevant to organizations; as such, proficiency in the national language of the host country can help to better adjust expatriates to the new cultures. With these results, this study can suggest that beside other types of fit, there can be person culture fit, which can be helpful in successful adjustments and therefore successful assignments of expatriates to new cultures.

By providing the pre-transfer trainings regarding creation of awareness to host cultures, learning the host's national language and other aspects of culture of the host country's organization can create the person culture fit. If organizations are able to create this person culture fit, it can make the expatriate employees and their families to successfully transit from one culture to another by enabling them develop an understanding of the concept of culture and intercultural communication, the notions of national differences and values orientations, differences in organizational cultures, the psychological processes of cross-cultural transition and country-specific knowledge. With these tools, the expatriate employees and their families will be able to fully enjoy their experience and function effectively in their new environment.

As it is clear from the literature, all types of fits in the person environment fit have positive effects on the performance of the employees. So, we can also suppose that if there is the presence of person culture fit in any fit, it will have positive effects on the performance of international employees. Consequently, it will be really helpful in successful completion of organizations' international assignments, as well as reduce the turnover and quitting intentions.

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