Why do they Go?

Individual and Corporate Perspectives on the Factors Influencing the Decision to Accept an International Assignment

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Abstract

This paper explores the motives of individuals to accept international assignments. It uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to further our understanding of how important a variety of items are in the decision to work abroad. Employing a mutual dependency perspective it contrasts individual motives and organizational perspectives. Organizations significantly underestimate the importance of career, work/life balance and development considerations and overestimate the financial imperative and some family motives. The analysis showed that for individuals some of these factors significantly relate to outcome variables in terms of the perceived career capital accrued from assignments. The paper presents a more nuanced picture of influence factors on the decision to go and advocates the use of context-sensitive, multiple perspectives. Practical implications for multinational organizations are discussed.

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There is an extensive literature on the use of expatriation and why organizations and individuals use it. The classic corporate motivations have been delineated as knowledge transfer, management development, the creation of a common organizational culture and the building of effective informal information networks, which result in organizational development (Harzing and Van Ruysseveldt, 2004: 259-262). At the individual level, Stahl, Miller and Tung (2002: 217) argued that relatively little is known about why expatriates accept international work. A number of authors have pointed out that, with respect to career management, individual and organizational needs are not always in total harmony (Vance, 2005; Thomas, Lazarova and Inkson, 2005, Yan, Hu, and Hall, 2002).

The research that has been carried out has identified a range of employee concerns about international working, including issues with location, work-life balance, financial concerns and the impact of an international assignment (IA) on career and career progression. Much of the literature has concentrated on the willingness to accept international postings (Adler, 1986; Brett and Stroh 1995; Tharenou, 2003). Brett and Stroh (1995) and Yurkiewicz and Rosen (1995) provide an overview of factors that affect the willingness to relocate internationally: these include age, education, race, gender, type of work, career ambition, attitude towards moving, job tenure, having a working spouse, having dependants, children at home, community links and tenure, openness to change and previous foreign experience. While the literature identifies a range of elements that guide expatriates in their decision to accept an international assignment, only a few studies have focussed on the actual acceptance of international mobility opportunities.

Existing research does not explore how well employers understand their employees' motivations for international work.

This paper presents what is known about the factors that influence the decision of managers to accept expatriation, refines the measurement of those influences and explores how closely aligned are individual and organizational views. The paper uses the empirical evidence to draw conclusions for the academic debate and for practitioners.

The Decision to Go in the Literature

Typical motives for the individual in accepting an international role have been linked to the job on offer, the opportunity to have new experiences and learning possibilities, personal interest in international experience, family and domestic issues, the location of the assignment, and the overall assignment offer including the repatriation package and the financial impact of working abroad (Gregersen, Morrison and Black, 1998; Hammer, Hart and Rogan, 1998; Harvey, 1985; Mendenhall, 2001; Miller and Cheng, 1978; Stahl et al, 2002; Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Tung, 1998). Increasingly, authors have proposed the importance of exploring the interplay of individuals and organizations in expatriation as it influences the decisions and behaviours of managers (Dickmann and Harris, 2005; Larsen, 2004; Vance, 2005; Yan et al., 2002). Key ideas within these themes are reviewed below.

Job, Development and Career Opportunities in IM

Consideration by individuals of the impact of foreign work on their own development and likely career opportunities were a key focus of the expatriation literature (Handler and Lane, 1997; Miller and Cheng, 1978; Richardson and Mallon, 2005; Suutari and Brewster, 2000; Tung, 1998; Yan et al., 2002). For instance, Miller and Cheng (1978) argued that career progression is the key motivator for managers in accepting an international posting. Stahl & Cerdin (2004) found that expatriates appreciated their international experience as an opportunity for personal and professional development and career advancement, despite dissatisfaction with the lack of long-term planning in the repatriation practices of their organizations. Stahl et al (2002) also attributed major importance to job, development and career issues as reasons for accepting foreign work. Tung's (1998) data indicated that expatriates value the opportunity to acquire skills and experience usually not available at home and see international work as important for career development.

Large multinational organizations see expatriation as a key means to achieving the development of global leaders (Harris and Dickmann, 2005). International assignments give expatriates an opportunity to improve their intercultural capabilities and general management skills (Gregersen et al, 1998; Mendenhall, 2001). Career conscious expatriates are increasingly seen to be aware of activities that increase their career capital (Inkson and Arthur, 2001). Networking is an important part of the career capital of international assignees and it is likely that the decision to accept expatriation is influenced by consideration of the perceived impact of expatriate work on social capital (Cappellen and Janssens, 2005; Dickmann and Harris, 2005). Harvey, Novicevic and

Garrison (2005) argue that associability and trust are two productive underlying dimension of social capital. Social capital benefits the collective directly and an individual indirectly (Leana and Van Buren, 1999) in that through associability the individual is willing and able to subordinate his or her goals and associated actions to collective goals and actions. If these individuals are confident of other persons' integrity and reliability they trust them. Trust and associability may be especially important in organizational contexts that are characterised by a high degree of informality which encourage individuals to focus strongly on building their social capital (Dickmann and Harris, 2005). The influence that opportunities to extend the social capital of expatriates has on their decision to go abroad has been relatively neglected (Brett and Stroh, 1995; Fish and Wood, 1997; Stahl et al., 2002; Yurkiewicz and Rosen, 1995).

Personal and Domestic Issues in IM

The concept of boundaryless careers, in which the work experiences of individuals transcend organizations and jobs (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1996), has recently become more prevalent (Eby, Butts and Lockwood, 2003). The protean career concept (Hall, 1976, 1996) raises the profile of personal goals in how individual's decide to pursue work and career. The person's own values and needs become the driving forces (Yan et al., 2002). The literature outlines the importance of personal interests in developing international experience to accepting work overseas (Miller and Cheng, 1978; Tung, 1998). Suutari and Brewster (2000) found a significant attitudinal difference between traditional company expatriates and self-initiated foreign workers' interest in internationalism. Moreover, Inkson, Arthur, Pringle and Barry (1997) argued that many young Australians and New Zealanders seek adventure and go overseas for reasons of travel, work and tourism. These motives are supported by research from Richardson and Mallon (2005) who

explored the reasons academics accept work overseas. Their findings indicated that many are guided by motives such as an individual desire for adventure, travel and life change.

There is an increasing body of knowledge that deals with issues beyond the direct job, development and career factors that impact international mobility. Harvey has long been active in researching the impact of family and spouses on expatriation (Harvey, 1985; 1995). The study focusing on German expatriates by Stahl, Miller and Tung (2002) presented data on how important family or spouse-related motives are in accepting international assignments. The literature provides extensive coverage on the issues of expatriate couples and dual careers (Brett and Stroh, 1995; Falkenberg and Monachello, 1990; Linehan and Walsh, 2000). Overall, these works suggest that to ensure a successful assignment the willingness of both partners to relocate should be taken into account and the family should be supported by broad, company-sponsored help mechanisms before, during and after the assignment (Harvey, 1985; Sparrow, Brewster and Harris, 2004).

Intimately linked to family and spouse considerations is the balance between work and non-work activities. Wider work-life considerations are important since they are amongst the problems most often mentioned in international mobility and traditional expatriation (Fenwick, 2001). Unfortunately, this area is not explored sufficiently by the research focussing on the motives that guide managers to accept an expatriate post (Brett and Stroh, 1995; Fish and Wood, 1997; Stahl et al., 2002). Thus, it is important to explore personal and non-work related influence factors on the decision to accept international work.

Location Factors

The difference between home country and destination country has led to much research exploring cultural distances and processes, times and methods and how expatriates adjust emotionally and intellectually to the new environment (Black, Gregersen and Mendenhall, 1992; Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Shaffer and Luk, 2005; Haslberger, 2005; Spony, 2003; Tung, 1998). Generally, this research highlights the importance of companies' international mobility policies and practices (such as pre-departure preparation), host culture, language compatibility, distance from home country and personal security, to potential expatriates. Yurkiewicz and Rosen (1995) found that location factors can be greater barriers to accepting expatriation than financial or career considerations. But the degree of importance of location factors is far from clear. For instance, Stahl et al (2002) found that their respondents only attributed a moderate influence to geographic location on accepting expatriation. Moreover, because authors tend to ask participants to rank items (Stahl et al., 2002; Yurkiewicz and Rosen, 1995) it is impossible to quantify the differences in importance between items.

Assignment Offer

Monetary consideration are seen by the writers in the field as important to expatriates (Miller and Cheng, 1978; Yurkiewicz and Rosen, 1995). However, Stahl et al. (2002) argued that the importance of financial packages has been overstressed and that studies have mainly concentrated on American expatriates. Instead, the authors argued that the strength of this motive may vary according to the nationality of the sample. Only 50 percent of their German sample put this motive as one of the five most important reasons for accepting an international assignment. Fish and Wood (1997) also argued that among their sample of Australian managers, the

motivation to undertake expatriation was linked more to personally desired intrinsic outcomes than to immediate extrinsic gratification.

Moreover, the assignment offer may consist of more than financial compensation. It is likely that expatriates take the whole package, through to repatriation, into account. There is increasing evidence that repatriation is amongst the most difficult international mobility issues for organizations to manage and that expatriates are relatively discontent with the policies and practices of their corporations (Stahl and Cerdin, 2004; Sparrow et al., 2004). Yurkiewicz and Rosen (1995) found that a written guarantee of a position upon completion was seen as an incentive to accept an overseas posting for four out of five of their respondents. It is likely, therefore, that longer-term considerations such as repatriation offers will have an influence on the individuals decision to accept a foreign posting.

A broader perspective on the Decision to Go

In order to summarise this literature, we note that individuals consider a wide range of factors in deciding whether or not to accept an international assignment offer. However Vance (2005: 375) lamented that the international management literature has neglected to explore how individuals strive to obtain developmental foreign work experiences. He juxtaposed this with the increasing attention paid to the individual's own career management. Thus there are still some areas where research gaps exist including the impact of family consideration, the importance of financial incentives, individual perceptions on the career capital they expect to gain and the direct career impact upon repatriation on the individual decision to go. Although we now have considerable data about both individual and organizational perspectives on expatriation and repatriation these

have largely been researched independently. Since those individuals who chose to take up international assignments within an organizational context constitute a large and increasing population there is a significant gap in research on organizational context, such as managerial perspectives on individual decision making. Thomas, Lazarova and Inkson (2005: 345) argued that research must 'focus much more clearly on the relationship between the global career actor and organizations'. Also Larsen (2004) reiterated the need for global careers to be viewed as a dynamic dual dependency between organization and individual. The literature indicates clearly that the assessment of motives that guide the decision of individuals when they are considering taking an assignment abroad can be extended and refined.

First, it would be beneficial to include a broader career capital perspective. Thus, factors such as considerations of work/life balance and the individuals' perception of whether expatriation is likely to build their social capital should be incorporated. Second, there is an opportunity to move beyond the ranking of influence factors towards a measurement that allows a first insight into the differences in the relative weighting of those motives. In addition, we argue that it is important to understand the organizational perspective. The extent to which employers are aware of the relative importance of their expatriates' motives is likely to shape their international work strategies, policies and practices. This in turn has an effect on the perceptions and expectations of their international assignees. Contrasting expatriates' motivations to accept foreign work with their organizations' assessment of what drives these international workers will extend our understanding of the dynamic dual dependency alluded to by Larsen (2004).

This research therefore addressed the following questions:

- What are the key influence factors on the decision of expatriates to accept international work?

- How important are these influences for individuals?

- How do organizational representatives view the importance of these influences on individual employees' decision to accept international work?

- How closely aligned are the views of individual assignees with their organizational representatives?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Rousseau & Fried (2001) argued for the more widespread use of contextualization. Due to the increasing internationalization of organizational research and the rapidly diversifying nature of employee-organizational relations, context is an essential variable in understanding research outcomes. The qualitative research focussed on a single organizational context. This allowed the researchers to control for context in the confirmation and exploration of the factors important to the decision to accept an IA. A survey incorporating the factors highlighted by the qualitative research was designed to access a wider audience of individuals and organizational representatives.

Qualitative Interviews

The case company was a major financial services organization. The group head office is in the UK, with a workforce of over 200,000 people and extensive global reach. The organization has grown organically and through acquisition. Internationalisation has been an established strategy for both extending operational and market reach and as a development tool for executive career

progression. This company has an enduring tradition and established exemplary reputation for its expatriation strategy, policy and practice. It adopts a traditional approach to career development which is positioned as a key element of the expatriation experience. The research was carried out in close cooperation with the HR department.

The qualitative stage of this research was designed to be both confirmatory and exploratory. Based on a review of the literature a number of a priori assumptions guided the qualitative interviews which included the organizational career philosophy, strategy, policy and practice, perceived factors influencing the take up of IA and repatriation practices. Repatriates were also asked to reflect on the IA experience in terms of the career capital impact, perceived career outcomes and their use of acquired skills on return. (Examples of interview questions are included at Appendix A).

Non-probability sampling (Reynolds, Simintiras and Diamantopoulos, 2003) was used to purposefully select cases from the organizational database of international assignees. The interviewees had returned from assignment between 1998 and 2004, providing a range of individuals with varying lengths of return which allowed the exploration of repatriation experiences. The sampling frame incorporated criteria such as gender, personal circumstances on assignment, managerial level and function within the organization. The sample included both UK and Asia Pacific based personnel who had been seconded to a range of locations across the globe. A total of 30 interviews were conducted. Two senior managers responsible for strategy, policy and implementation of IAs secondments provided in-depth information (including documentation) on the organizational rationale for IAs. Twenty eight interviewees were

repatriates who returned to and had remained within the organization. The majority of interviewees were male (n= 21) and holding senior positions (n=19). Individuals held a range of functional roles across retail, corporate and IT. Length of international experience ranged between 1 and 7 years. Thus, this sample of interviewees afforded the opportunity to explore a breadth of IA, repatriation and post repatriation experiences, within this particular organizational context.

A combination of face-to face in-depth interviews by the authors and one-to-one in-depth telephone interviews were conducted between November 2004 and June 2005. The interviews were taped and transcribed. Through an iterative process of analysis and review, the data were structured by recurrent patterns and organized into analytical themes. A qualitative data analysis package (NVivo) was used to facilitate this process and to assist in extracting pertinent references and comments direct from interviewees (as outlined in *italics* below). The data within each theme were quantified for frequency of occurrence and positive or negative inference. This qualitative exploration of the individual experiences of IA, repatriation and post repatriation roles within a known organizational context provided substantial data to build a picture of the issues perceived as pertinent to the individual decision to go. Additionally the data about the organizational philosophy, the assignment offer and the management of the repatriation process provided perspective which helped to qualify and contextualise the responses from individuals.

Quantitative Survey

Two questionnaires were designed, one for international assignees to complete and one for HR managers. Each questionnaire format contained a number of identical questions in order to

enable comparison between the groups. Other questions related specifically to each target population.

The item pool for polling individual and organizational representatives' perceptions of the factors influencing the decision were constructed by subject matter experts based on the academic literature, the qualitative interview data and experienced practitioners in the field. An item pool was generated and selection of items was based on triangulation between the experts. This method ensured that a comprehensive range of the factors that might impact decision-making were included. Twenty-eight items were selected which provided comprehensive coverage of the range of factors highlighted by the literature, for example job and career issues, family issues, personal motivations, expatriation package and repatriation (see Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Scale anchors were generated by reference to survey item bank (British Telecom, 1981) that provided a number of tested scale formats. Following piloting of options, a 7-point scale was chosen, which included *No influence, Little influence, Mild influence, Moderate influence, Considerable influence, Great influence,* and *Very great influence.*

Each questionnaire contained a question relating to the decision to accept an assignment followed by the 28 factors. HR managers were asked: *How much influence do you believe the following factors have on your assignees' decision to accept an international assignment*?

Assignees were asked: *How much influence do the following factors have on your decision to accept an international assignment?*

A range of items regarding the perceived impact of the IA on the individual's career capital and career progression, as proxy items for the outcome of the IA were included. For example individual respondents were asked to rate on a five point scale the perceived impact (little or no impact to very great impact) of the assignment on building career relevant networks, developing capabilities and building motivation. Scales was also developed to ascertain the type of role offered post-assignment (promoted role, lateral role or demoted role) and the extent to which the individual perceived the IA to improve career prospects (on a 5 point Likert scale: no extent to very great extent).

A full pilot questionnaire was designed for each group (HR, corporate representatives and individuals). Pilot questionnaires were then sent to a sample of the target population. Responses were analysed and feedback was obtained through follow-up telephone interviews and feedback emails. Some small amendments were made to the questionnaires to provide the final versions to be used in the study.

The final questionnaires were placed on the web. Potential participants were identified by contact with 15 multi-national companies that had previously agreed to take part in the research. Participants were invited to complete the questionnaires via emails with a link to the relevant web site. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire by a specified date. As this date approached reminder emails were sent to those who had not responded.

Individuals were instructed to refer to their most recent assignment and asked how much influence a list of 28 items had on their decision to accept their assignment. In contrast, the HR managers in charge of international mobility programmes, in the 15 companies were asked how much influence the same 28 items had on their assignees' decision to accept their assignments.

A total of 310 responses were obtained for the individual survey and there were responses from 49 HR managers (the "corporate survey" below). Of the individual respondents 27% were from the IT sector, a further 27% from financial and professional services and 15% from food and drinks companies. 35 respondents, (11.5% of the individual sample) were female. The median age of the respondents to the individual survey was 40 years, the youngest being 26 and the oldest 63. Almost 84% of the sample were married or living with a partner. 26% were unaccompanied on their assignment. The mean number of dependants was 2 and 56% on respondents had been on one or two assignments. These figures are similar to those in other surveys of expatriates.

Data gathered from the individual survey were analysed to provide descriptive statistics of responses to each decision item. Table 2 (below) shows the mean response achieved for each item along with the number of responses and the standard deviation. Results for useable responses are presented in order of influence, from most influential to least. Table 3 (below, page 19) indicates the views of the HR specialists responsible for the corporate expatriation policies. Table 4 (below, page 22) presents significant differences between individual and organizational assessments of the importance of factors for the decision to go.

FINDINGS: ASSESSING THE IMPORTANCE OF FACTORS INFLUENCING THE

DECISION TO ACCEPT AN INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENT

This section presents the findings of the survey, integrating data from the qualitative interviews to illustrate key issues. Table 2 both reinforces some of the previous wisdom whilst challenging other aspects of it. It shows that *position offered on assignment* was rated as the most influential factor by assignees when deciding whether to accept an assignment. *Distance away from home location* was perceived as the least influential factor. All categories of location factors, job, development and career opportunities, personal and domestic considerations and assignment offer are shown to be important to individuals.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Job, Development and Career Opportunities

The qualitative study indicated that the expatriation deal is positioned as "*career enhancing for the individual*" (Male, Senior Management). Within the case organization, individuals endorsed this view of the career benefits of expatriation. In the short term, the assignment job offered was

seen as a major influence factor. One respondent commented *"I look at the scope and content of the job"* (Male, Senior Management, Asia). In the longer term *"the promotion opportunity"*(Male, Middle Management, Asia) was an important factor in the decision to accept overseas work as was the opportunity to develop leadership skills "*if you are going to get to the top then you need to have international exposure within the organization*" (Male, Senior Management, UK).

The survey data confirmed job, career and development factors as the key factors in the decision to work abroad (as found in previous work such as Stahl et al., 2002; Tung, 1998; Yurkiewicz and Rosen, 1995). Items relating to these issues were ranked 1st, 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th and 8th rated out of 28 items.

Associability and trust are two underlying dimension of social capital (Harvey et al., 2005). Dickmann and Harris (2005) described an organization characterized by informal networks being important for international career advancement. Being known and trusted by powerful people in their home base was seen as a successful way to manage one's career. Moreover, international assignees acquire more know how. For example, gaining international business acumen and practicing their leadership skills was perceived to have an impact on their ability to acquire better social networks (cf. Inkson and Arthur, 2001; Harris and Dickmann, 2005). Previous work has indicated that the social capital strategies of individuals are influenced by organizational structures and policies (Dickmann and Doherty, in submission). This survey showed that individuals ranked (25th) the item maintaining work networks with the home country as less influential than many other factors, in their decision to work abroad.

Overall, the "corporate survey" rankings are different from those of the individuals, clearly taking less account of the professional challenge and skills development aspects involved. These differences are explored in more depth below.

Personal and Domestic Considerations

Family concerns, especially educational issues and the care for elderly relatives were seen as important in guiding their decision to accept expatriation by 19 of the 28 interviewees in the qualitative leg. *"I need to consider my daughter's education and my parents are getting old and I need to care for my old parents* (Male, Middle Management, Asia). Disruption to family life and work-life balance issues were considered important by both individuals and organizational representatives in the interviews. Rather than a barrier to international mobility, several interviewees gave educational and family reasons as a motivator to go abroad. This impression of importance was supported by the survey, in which two of the five most important factors for individuals were family related – *willingness of the spouse to move* and *children's educational needs.* Our results support the work of others who found that family related factors were important to the decision to go (Harvey, 1985; 1995; Sparrow et al., 2004).

The personal desire to have experience working abroad was considered highly motivating, for example *" It had been a long held ambition for me that I wanted to get some international experience and I wanted to work overseas, so as soon as the opportunity presented itself, I jumped at it…"* (Female, Senior Management, UK).

The desire to have a personally acceptable distribution between private and professional lives in the work-life balance equation is likely to be reflected in the considerations to accept foreign work (Baruch, 2004; Schein, 1990). A quarter (7) of interviewees referred to changes of general work/life balance that could present a barrier to go. "*For me personally I have always tried to maintain some kind of balance between my private life and my business life. I am not prepared to completely sacrifice one for the other. I don't think you can be completely happy in one, if you are not in the other.*" (Male, Top Management, UK). The item "work/life balance" was middle ranked by the individuals in the survey

The length of assignment has a sizeable influence on expatriates' decisions, being in the top half of the rankings. The direction of the effect is likely to depend on individual preferences and organizational context (Dickmann and Harris, 2005). Maintaining personal networks was ranked relatively low in the survey (22nd).

While the corporate rankings show many similarities with those of the individuals, they differed significantly with respect to the importance of work/life balance considerations and the interruption in the spouse's career.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Assignment Offer

This research is equivocal about the impression that financial considerations are primary drivers in the decision to accept expatriation (Miller and Cheng, 1978; Yurkiewicz and Rosen, 1995). Whereas personal financial circumstances were ranked 8th by the individuals (and 5th by the corporate respondents), the repatriation package itself was rated as a substantially lesser issue in both surveys. In the interviews, most individuals regarded the developmental and career benefits as overwhelming. About half of the interviewees also indicated that working abroad involved "*some financial incentive*" (Male, Senior HR, UK). For some, finance appeared to be more of a hygiene factor in terms of the influence on the decision to accept. **"***Certainly, at the time it* (finance) *was not a consideration for me."* (Female, Senior Management, UK).

Interviewees tended to regard the perceived insecurity about their future post as a barrier to taking an assignment. They commented: *"I think you are always concerned about where you are going to come back to"* (Female, Middle Management, UK).

From the survey the post-assignment role was seen as important. It was rated in the top half of all factors in both the individual and the corporate surveys. Individual and corporate rankings were often close in this category with the marked exception of the importance of personal financial impact. This difference will be explored in more depth below.

Location Factors

The host location, including adapting to the different cultures, was mentioned as influential by over half of the interviewees and is indicated in several items in the survey: for example, security

was the 9th highest rated factor in the decision. This is a concern reflected in the interviews : *"I don't want to go overseas just for the heck of it, and there are lots of places I do not want to go to. So I think, for the majority of people, location is a key consideration."* (Male, Top Management, UK).

Other location factors that influenced the decision to accept an international assignment offer included the living conditions in the country, perception of the cultural difference of the host nation and language. However, each of these items was rated in the bottom half of the list of factors by the survey participants. Overall, the ratings from the corporate survey show similar rankings to those from the individual survey in terms of location factors.

Exploring the differences between individual and organizational perspectives

Since our survey asked for rating on each item rather than for rankings, we are in a good position to compare the weightings given by corporate and individual respondents (changes in the weighting of one item will not affect the weighting of others). In order to assess more closely the systematic differences between the individual and corporate survey responses across all the factors, a series of T-tests were carried out. Table 4 presents the results of these analyses and highlights those factors that are rated significantly differently by the individual and corporate participants. In each case the level of significance and the group which rated the factor most influential is given.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

From Table 4 above it can be noted that corporate responses are close to the rankings of the individuals. However, corporate respondents appear to underestimate the influence that some of the factors have on assignees' decision making when choosing whether or not to accept an assignment. Individuals regarded predominantly developmental and job-related aspects as significantly more important than companies at the decision stage. Thus, leadership skills development, professional challenge, having job-related skills and general skills development were all significantly more important for expatriates than for their employers. This finding, combined with their relative importance in the ranking, supports the literature on the changing nature of careers (Baruch, 2004; Hall and Chandler, 2005). Cultural adaptation may point to the perceived greater need of individuals to go to a location where they feel they can adapt and understand the customs and culture and interact with locals in a meaningful way (Haslberger, 1999). Finally, an adequate balance between personal and professional life influences the decisions of expatriates to go more than is appreciated by organizations.

In turn, the organizational representatives placed significantly more importance than the managers on location (distance); and successful previous assignments. Moreover, corporate respondents overestimate the influence of the disruption to a spouse's career and the accompanying loss of income. However, this is likely to be mediated by the type of career a spouse may have. Some evidence of this is apparent in the high Standard Deviation for these items seen in Table 2. This suggests that for some people such disruption would be very influential.

Corporate respondents also appear to overestimate the influence of the financial impact, possibly because much other research outlines that the financial conditions of expatriation are important to assignees (Yurkiewicz and Rosen, 1995) and that many international workers are dissatisfied with their compensation and benefit packages (Stahl and Cerdin, 2004). Our data indicate that although financial issues are important to individuals at the point they decide to accept an overseas posting they are not as important for their decision as corporations expect them to be, a finding that is broadly in line with Fish and Wood's (1997) data on repatriates.

Currently the literature suggests that organizations use few formal tracking mechanisms to follow-up the career progression of repatriates, but we do know that subjective impressions of repatriates paint a somewhat bleak picture of the perceived career consequences of taking an international assignment. We included a number of items in this survey as proxy outcome measures of the perceived impact of the international assignment. These included questions tapping the perceived career capital gained from the assignment; type of role offered and perceived impact on career prospects and career progression.

For those items where there were significant differences (p<.01) between corporate and individual respondents ratings of the factors, a series of correlations with the proxy outcome factors (career capital impact and career progression) were carried out (see Table 5 below). 'Having relevant job related skills' and 'Potential for leadership skills development' (R=.194, R=.187 respectively) both correlate with perceptions of a positive impact on the development of social capital (building career relevant networks and sources of information). Where individuals perceive 'Having relevant job related skills' and 'Potential for leadership skills development' as

important influential factors in the decision to go there is a greater perceived impact of the assignment on their social capital (knowing whom).

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

The analysis also revealed that the influence factors 'Potential for job skills development' and 'Potential for leadership skills development', correlated positively (R=.387 and R=.316 respectively) with positive perceptions of impact on capability development (developing capabilities, work related skills, expertise and experience). Thus, where individuals indicated a high level of influence of these factors on their decision to go they also indicated a positive impact on their skills development (knowing how) as an outcome of the IA.

The higher the perceived influence of 'Potential for job skills development', 'Potential for leadership skills development', 'Professional challenge of working abroad' and 'Successful previous assignment' the greater the perceived impact of the assignment on individual motivation building (personal beliefs, values and sense of purpose) (respectively R=.205, R=.257, R=.182 and R=.175). Where individuals indicated that the potential for skills and leadership development, professional challenge and successful previous assignment were highly influential in the decision to go, they reported a perceived significant impact on their motivation (knowing why).

Another important finding was a significant correlation between the influence factor of 'Potential for leadership skills development' (R=.119) with perceived improved career prospects outside the organisation. Where individuals attributed more influence to this factor in their decision making they perceived better prospects. In addition the item 'Potential for leadership development' correlates significantly with type of role post assignment (R=.152) (scale inverted: demotion, lateral, promotion), indicating the where this item was attributed more influence in the decision to go, the individual was more likely to achieve a post assignment promotion.

Significant differences were found between individual and corporate respondents on two items relating to the importance of loss of partner's income and interruption to career. These items were relevant to a sub-set of the total population of individual respondents and one item 'loss of partner's income' was significantly correlated with role offered post assignment; those more concerned with loss of income were more likely to achieve promotion on return (R=.146). Although it unclear what may lie behind this relationship, it was considered likely that age may be a confounding variable. To test this, a partial correlation in which age was controlled for was carried out. This analysis showed that once age had been controlled for there was no significant correlation between the two variables. Therefore it may be that a combination of issues such as age-career stage and dual career concerns are at play to underpin this association.

There has been little in previous research to explore the impact of the factors influencing the decision to undertake an expatriate assignment on outcomes. This study exposes some of the potential interactions between what motivates individuals and the perceived career impacts of such an experience. Our findings indicate that the potential for individual career capital

(knowing) development is strongly related to some of their initial motivations to take up an assignment. In particular individuals who are strongly motivated by the potential to develop their skills and in particular their leadership skills appear to believe that they profit from an IA not only in terms of enhanced capabilities, networks and motivations but also in their internal promotion and perceived external career progression prospects.

DISCUSSION

The qualitative part of the research set out to explore a range of factors collated from as review of the literature which were key influence factors for expatriates to accept an expatriation offer. By studying these issues within a known organizational context, we were able to understand the impact of context on the individual. The influence factors concerned the areas of location, job, development and career opportunities, personal and domestic factors and assignment offer considerations. While these motives had been identified in the literature before (Adler, 1986; Miller and Cheng, 1978;Yurkiewicz and Rosen, 1995) further considerations which had been relatively neglected in previous research items such as work-life balance issues, length of assignment considerations and broad security concerns were identified as important in the decision to go.

The results of 310 survey responses from individuals support the importance of job, development and career considerations. However, the data also challenged the predominant argument that financial considerations are a primary motive for expatriates and, instead, points to the

importance of development and family considerations. The research also indicated that security, length of assignment and work-life balance issues have a considerable influence on the decision of individuals to accept expatriation. Thus, these data support the notion that individuals conduct complex assessments upon accepting international assignments and that often these assessments are guided by intrinsic, Protean career considerations (Hall, 1976).

In response to the many writers who call for the exploration of the individual and organizational perspectives in international careers and expatriation (Larsen, 2004; Vance, 2005; Yan et al., 2002) the research explored the degree of alignment between organizational representatives' perceptions and employee motivations to accept overseas work. In so doing it refined the measures of influences on the decision to go and extended the research scope. Looking at organizational and individual responses to the same list of factors allowed an exploration of the dual dependency of expatriation decision making. Our research highlighted substantial differences between individuals' and their employers' perceptions of the drivers and barriers to accepting international work. Such differences in opinion may fundamentally impact on the perceived 'success' of an international assignment, for example the relative importance of the developmental aspects attributed by individuals may set different expectations and therefore diverse views of the outcomes between individuals and their employers. The implication is that research in this field of career management needs diverse methodologies and multiple perspectives to gain a balanced and refined view that takes account of the mutual dependency that actors experience (Larsen, 2004).

The findings show that the corporate HR specialists have a shrewd view of the importance of most issues to employees. However, there are some significant differences. For instance, while organizations overestimate the impact of prior experience with assignments, financial and family considerations, they underestimate cultural adaptability factors, developmental issues and work-life considerations.

This study takes a step further than previous work on expatriation by exploring the impact of the influencing factors on the decision to go on perceived outcomes for the individual expatriate. The schism between individual and organizational views on the factors that are important to the decision to go may have more fundamental implications than just a 'difference of opinion'. Where individuals attributed factors significantly more influence on their decision to go than signalled by corporate representatives, there were significant relationships with perceptions of outcome. The perceived potential for development embodied in an IA had a significant association with the perceived career capital impact. Thus, those individuals who are concerned with the developmental aspects of an IA appear to regard the assignment as a positive opportunity. Having relevant job related skills and having had a previous successful assignment were also significantly related to career capital outcomes potentially indicating that confidence in the perceived ability to fulfil the assignment role is important to potential assignees. Achieving clarity about the purpose of the assignment is an area that still lacks adequate research and good practice. In addition, those individuals for whom 'potential for leadership development' is a key decision factor appear to benefit from an IA not only in terms of positive outcomes across the career capital areas but also in terms of promotion on return and enhanced career prospects

outside the organization, a continuing concern for companies where attrition of expatriate talent is high.

For practitioners within organizations, one of the messages from the research is that understanding individual motivations and harnessing them will become an increasingly important aspect of successful international assignment management. The research covered the relevance of a wide range of factors in making the decision to go on assignment. It emerged that organizations were more focused on the financial package to encourage a positive decision to go but that individuals increasingly undertake a complex assessment that includes development, career and live-style factors. One added value of this research has been to attempt to tease out the potential implications of a difference between an individual and an organizational assessment of the factors considered important to the decision to expatriate. This paper exposed some potential dilemmas which could arise from mismatched perceptions of the expatriation experience within a dual dependency mode. Not only do individual consider some factors to be significantly more important to their decision to go than perceived by company representatives, but these factors appear to have significant relationships with outcomes. The danger of companies understating these factors in policy and practice would be a potentially negative impact on the very individuals who appear to get the most out of an IA. A one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with expatriation policies and practices may increasingly harbour risks.

CONCLUSIONS

This research highlighted significant differences between employees and their employers in the assessment of the factors driving the decision to accept an international assignment.

This is one of the first studies to attempt to identify in detail the full range of factors that individuals take into account when they take the decision to accept an assignment abroad, and to compare the weightings that they give those assignments with the weightings given by the HR specialists in their organisations. Nevertheless, there are a number of aspects of the current research which would benefit from improvement.

The qualitative research concentrated on one organizational context. Although this could lead to bias, in-depth knowledge of the context facilitated an fuller understanding of the responses. The key gap in current research concerns the lack of work which explores individual and organizational views as a two sides of the same coin. Thus, the survey methodology enabled us to begin to tease out some of the different perceptions of individuals and organizations. Future research may usefully explore a variety of specific company contexts, for instance, the formal expatriation policies as well as the informal perceptions of the 'value' of international assignments for long-term careers, in more depth. Moreover, exploring the goals of individual expatriates and linking them to outcomes, ideally with sensitivity to the temporal dimension, would be an exciting research avenue. In order to extend the current research a larger sample and greater range of organizations would be beneficial. In particular a range of organisations headquartered in different countries, and comparison of views in real time would be valuable.

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Table 1. The twenty-eight decision factors

Having relevant job related skills
Potential for job skills development
Potential for leadership skills development
Career progression
Perception of career risk
Maintaining work networks with the home country
Work/Life balance
Intercultural adaptability to the host culture
Professional challenge of working abroad
Willingness of spouse to move
Children's education needs
Interruption in spouse career
Loss of partners income
Maintaining personal networks
Personal health status
Desire to live abroad
Successful previous assignment(s)
Personal financial impact
Position offered on assignment
Length of an assignment
Potential role(s) available on completion of assignment
Language compatibility
Security
Distance away from home location
Host country culture
Host country standard of living
Pre-departure preparation
Repatriation package

Table 2. Individual responses - order of influence on the importance for the decision to accept expatriation

Item	Position	N	Mean	SD
Position offered on assignment	1	305	5.82	1.04
Willingness of spouse to move	2	250	5.73	1.49
Potential for leadership skills development	3	308	5.66	1.13
Career progression	4	309	5.61	1.22
Children's educational needs	5	215	5.6	1.86
Potential for job skills development	6	309	5.56	.97
Professional challenge of working abroad	7	308	5.01	1.43
Personal financial impact	8	309	4.98	1.39
Security	9	309	4.96	1.59
Potential role(s) available on completion of assignment	10	307	4.93	1.62
Length of an assignment	11	307	4.85	1.32
Having relevant job related skills	12	308	4.82	1.08
Desire to live abroad	13	308	4.7	1.64
Work/Life balance	14	309	4.69	1.3
Host country standard of living	15	309	4.59	1.41
Repatriation package	16	309	4.45	1.73
Intercultural adaptability to the host culture	17	309	4.42	1.43
Successful previous assignment(s)	18	305	4.31	1.79
Perception of career risk	19	307	4.24	1.48
Personal health status	20	305	4.16	1.84
Host country culture	21	308	4.06	1.54
Maintaining personal networks	22	307	3.91	1.4
Language compatibility	23	308	3.88	1.64
Interruption in spouse career	24	247	3.81	2.13
Maintaining work networks with the home country	25	308	3.66	1.51
Loss of partners income	26	246	3.56	2.08
Pre-departure preparation	27	307	3.4	1.58
Distance away from home location	28	309	3.05	1.64

(N.B. Table 2 is corrected for marital status and children).

Table 3. Corporate responses - order of influence on the perceived importance for the decision to accept expatriation.

Item	Position	N	Mean	SD
Willingness of spouse to move	1	48	5.83	.95
Children's education needs	2	49	5.76	.97
Position offered on assignment	3	49	5.57	.89
Career progression	4	49	5.53	1.14
Personal financial impact	5	49	5.39	.91
Interruption in spouse career	6	49	5.39	1.3
Loss of partners income	7	49	5.16	1.42
Potential for leadership skills development	8	49	5.06	1.09
Security	9	48	4.94	1.34
Potential for job skills development	10	49	4.92	1.02
Potential role(s) available on completion of assignment	11	49	4.86	1.4
Host country standard of living	12	49	4.78	1.33
Successful previous assignment(s)	13	49	4.76	1.32
Desire to live abroad	14	49	4.76	1.05
Length of an assignment	15	48	4.6	1.11
Perception of career risk	16	49	4.51	1.19
Professional challenge of working abroad	17	48	4.50	1.05
Having relevant job related skills	18	49	4.24	1.2
Repatriation package	19	49	4.16	1.55
Personal health status	20	49	4.02	1.28
Work/Life balance	21	49	4	1
Host country culture	22	49	4	1.34
Maintaining personal networks	23	48	3.79	1.03
Distance away from home location	24	49	3.76	1.33
Intercultural adaptability to the host culture	25	49	3.73	1.09
Language compatibility	26	49	3.53	1.44
Maintaining work networks with the home country	27	49	3.37	1.24
Pre-departure preparation	28	49	3.35	1.18

Table 4. Results of T-test comparisons for each factor between Individual and Corporate responses

Decision Factor	Most influence	Level of significant difference
Having relevant job related skills	Individual	P = .001
Potential for job skills development	Individual	P < .001
Potential for leadership skills development	Individual	P = .001
Career progression		NS
Perception of career risk		NS
Maintaining work networks with the home country		NS
Work/Life balance	Individual	P < .001
Intercultural adaptability to the host culture	Individual	P < .001
Professional challenge of working abroad	Individual	P = .019
Willingness of spouse to move		NS
Children's education needs		NS
Interruption in spouse career	Corporate	P < .001
Loss of partners income	Corporate	P < .001
Maintaining personal networks		NS
Personal health status		NS
Desire to live abroad		NS
Successful previous assignment(s)	Corporate	P = .04
Personal financial impact	Corporate	P = .009
Position offered on assignment		NS
Length of an assignment		NS
Potential role(s) available on completion of assignment		NS
Language compatibility		NS
Security		NS
Distance away from home location	Corporate	P = .004
Host country culture		NS
Host country standard of living		NS
Pre-departure preparation		NS
Repatriation package		NS

Table 5. Results of correlations between items rated significantly differently between individual and corporate representatives with proxy outcome measures

	Building career relevant networks, and sources of information.	Developing capabilities – work related skills, expertise and experience	Building motivation – personal beliefs, values and sense of purpose.	Improved career prospects outside your organisation.	Role offered post assignment.
Having relevant job Related skill	.194** .001 304	.087 .131 303	.066 .253 303	.034 .561 302	-.067 .293 251
Potential for job skills development	.107 .062 305	.387** .000 304	.205** .000 304	.055 .342 303	.128* .042 252
Potential for leadership skills development	.187** .001 304	.316** .000 303	.257** .000 303	.119* .039 302	.152* .016 251
Work/life Balance	.081 .158 305	.050 .384 304	.056 .334 304	.039 .494 303	.024 .708 252
Intercultural adaptability to the host culture	.127* .026 305	.047 .418 304	.109 .057 304	.003 .955 303	-.048 .445 252
Professional challenge of working abroad	.119* .038 304	.125* .029 303	.182** .001 303	.077 .182 302	.006 .924 251
Successful previous assignments	.116* .044 301	.105 .068 300	.175** .002 300	.059 .312 299	.055 .384 249
Personal financial impact	.104 .070 305	.033 .568 304	.088 .125 304	.106 .006 303	.074 .244 252
Distance away from home location	-.103 .071 305	-.092 .110 304	-.119* .038 304	-.035 .544 303	.033 .599 252
Loss of partners income	-.106 .097 245	-.107 .096 244	-.003 .968 245	-.044 .495 243	.146* .036 207
Interruption in spouse career	-.113 .077 246	-.015 .815 245	.117 .067 246	-.062 .332 244	.130 .062 207

(***P= .05; **P= .01**)

Appendix A: Sample interview questions

1. What was your position before you worked abroad?
2. How did your expatriation experience come about? Did you actively pursue international work? Did your organization ask you to work abroad?
3. What pros and cons did you consider before you accepted international work? How important were these factors for your decision to take up work abroad?
4. What might have deterred you from accepting the international work?
   a. Career
   b. Professional development
   c. Compensation and other financial impact
   d. Host country (security, standard of living, specific location within country)
   e. Work content (job challenge, responsibility, stress - organizational expectations)
   f. Personal considerations
   g. Work/life – family
   h. Other factors

5. What skills, knowledge and abilities did you acquire through working abroad?
6. What happened to your social networks at work? Please comment on
   a) preservation of links to your home country
   b) establishment and deepening of social networks in your host location
   c) expansion of international work contacts

7. What impact did your work experiences abroad have on
   a) what motivates you in your working life?
   b) your general view of the balance between work / non-work life?

8. What did you think about the position / role that was offered on return from the international work?

Overall Impact
9. Would you say that in your organization working abroad is generally beneficial for one's career? Why?
10. How do you assess the impact your work experiences abroad had on your commitment to your organization? Based on your foreign work experience, are you now more, equal or less likely to stay with your organization?
11. Generally, what did you learn from the international experience?
12. What impact has the international assignment had on your career / career prospects?

13. What is your position now? Do you regard your current job as a promotion in relation to your job before you worked abroad?

Note: The interview questions were designed to address issues beyond international mobility. This paper only uses the relevant information relating to the decision to go on assignment.