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The selection of expatriate development workers: An empirical investigation of criteria used by UK-based NGOs

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Keywords NGO, international development, expatriation, selection criteria

Introduction

Expatriation takes place in a range of organisational and cultural contexts. However, early research in this field focused on the expatriation of senior managers working for North American MNCs (e.g. Tung 1981, 1982). Our understanding of expatriate selection is therefore largely derived from this specific context. However even at this early stage, the need to focus research attention on different expatriation contexts was noted (eg. Tung 1981, 1982). It was not until much more recently though, that this call was repeated (Harris & Brewster 1999), and some work has begun to examine different contexts (e.g. Navara & James 2002). This paper seeks to make a preliminary contribution to the goal of testing existing theory in different expatriation contexts by examining the criteria that NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) use to select their expatriate development workers.

Expatriation in international development

It has been suggested that expatriation through NGOs has grown, and that we can learn a lot from this non-profit context (Scullion & Brewster 2001). The rationale for examining development workers can be advanced by considering the environment in which they operate. For example;

- Participatory approaches to development inherently require contact with host communities. Navara & James (2002) found evidence to suggest that higher levels of contact with host nationals increase the adjustive challenge.
- Development workers frequently live and work in rural locations, where the host culture can be more distinct (Knowles 1998). Greater cultural distance has been found to make the process of adjustment more challenging (Redmond 2000).
- Development workers often work in situations of extreme poverty and hardship. This not only affects the individuals physically in terms of their living and working conditions, but emotionally in terms of witnessing suffering and inequities in wealth distribution, and from burnout caused by continued "giving" (Knowles 1998).

- Development workers are more likely to be working in locations where it is difficult or impossible to seek the support of other expatriates, leading to feelings of isolation (Knowles 1998).

The challenges likely to be faced by expatriate development workers suggest that it is especially important for suitable individuals to be selected for such posts.

Selection of expatriates

Many studies on the management of expatriates focus on pre-departure training and on-site socialisation (eg. Selmer et al. 1998, Suutari & Birch 2001). However, the effectiveness of these interventions is implicitly reliant on having first selected suitable individuals for the overseas assignment.

Selection on technical competence

Based on the ethnocentric perspective, a universalist view of expatriation previously dominated the international human resource management literature. Here, it was argued that technical competence is the key to international success (eg. Lanier 1979). Reflecting this, it has been suggested that expatriate staff have traditionally been selected on the basis of their technical competence (Hays 1971, 1974; Kealey & Protheroe 1996). However, more recent work by Dowling et al. (1994) confirms the common-sense view that technical competence, although important, has no effect on the ability to adapt to new cultures.

Selection on prior overseas experience

Reflecting a focus on the ability to adjust to a host culture and to reconcile the need for different relational skills, Kealey & Protheroe (1996) suggest that many international recruitment specialists use previous overseas experience as a key selection criterion. However, an earlier study by Kealey (1989) found limited evidence to suggest that although prior overseas experience was beneficial to cultural adjustment, it was not an accurate predictor of individual work-role performance. More recently though, Yavas & Bodur (1999) found evidence to suggest that longer previous overseas experience contributed positively to cross-cultural adjustment.

Selection on personality characteristics

The importance of personality characteristics has been supported by many researchers (see for example, Arthur & Bennett 1995; Black 1990; Caligiuri 2000; Church 1982). Whilst researchers such as Caligiuri (2000), Gong (2003) and Selmer (1999) appear to focus on linking specific traits with adjustment, Ward & Chang (1997) argue that it is not the expatriate's personality per se, but the degree of difference between the expatriate's personality and the typical host culture personality that influences their ability to adjust. Similarly, Katz & Seifer (1996) argue that the necessary personality traits are contingent on the nature of the job and the degree of cultural separation between home and host country.

Research question

The purpose of this research is to address the research question “How do UK-based NGOs recruit staff for overseas assignments?”

Method

This study employed a postal survey consisting of both quantitative and qualitative questions. The questionnaire was distributed using the membership directory of British Overseas NGOs for Development (BOND). BOND is “the network of more than 290 UK based voluntary organisations working in international development and development education” (BOND 2006). At the time of data collection, the list contained 215 member organisations. After follow-ups, a total of 89 responses were received, giving a response rate of 41%. Of these replies, 26 reported using expatriate staff, giving a usable response rate of 12%. Due to the small sample size, non-parametric tests were used to examine the quantitative data. Qualitative data was used to illustrate and offer explanation for the quantitative findings.

Findings

The findings suggest that UK-based NGOs appear to employ selection criteria that are consistent with the existing literature. Prior overseas experience, professional qualifications and experience, and possession of suitable social skills and personality traits were all reported to be important by respondents. Interestingly, specific host country experience was not considered to be important.

Analysis suggested tentative links between NGO characteristics and the reported importance of selection criteria. The most significant link was between criteria relating to prior experience and technical competence, and NGO size as measured by annual income. The results suggest that professional qualifications and experience are both reported to be more important by NGOs with higher annual incomes. Similarly, previous overseas experience was also reported to be more important by NGOs with higher annual incomes, suggesting that larger NGOs favour selection based on track record. Other NGO characteristics were found to be loosely associated with the reported importance of selection criteria.

Contribution

The findings from this study contribute to existing knowledge about selection criteria for expatriate staff in several ways. First, the study is believed to be the first that examines the criteria used by NGOs to select expatriate development workers. Second, the findings offer further support for the role of specific selection criteria in the selection of expatriate staff by providing confirmatory evidence from a new expatriation context. Third, the study examined the relationship between the reported importance of selection criteria and organisational (NGO) characteristics.

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