

Re-examining the Expatriate Experience through a Fit Lens

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Abstract

This developmental paper explores the nexus of PO fit and international assignment. It first reviews Black, Mendenhall and Oddou's (1991) framework of international adjustment and then suggests a more appropriate explanatory framework might be Schneider's (1987) Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) framework. Common threads are noted and a new methodology to explore the expatriate experience is proposed.

Introduction

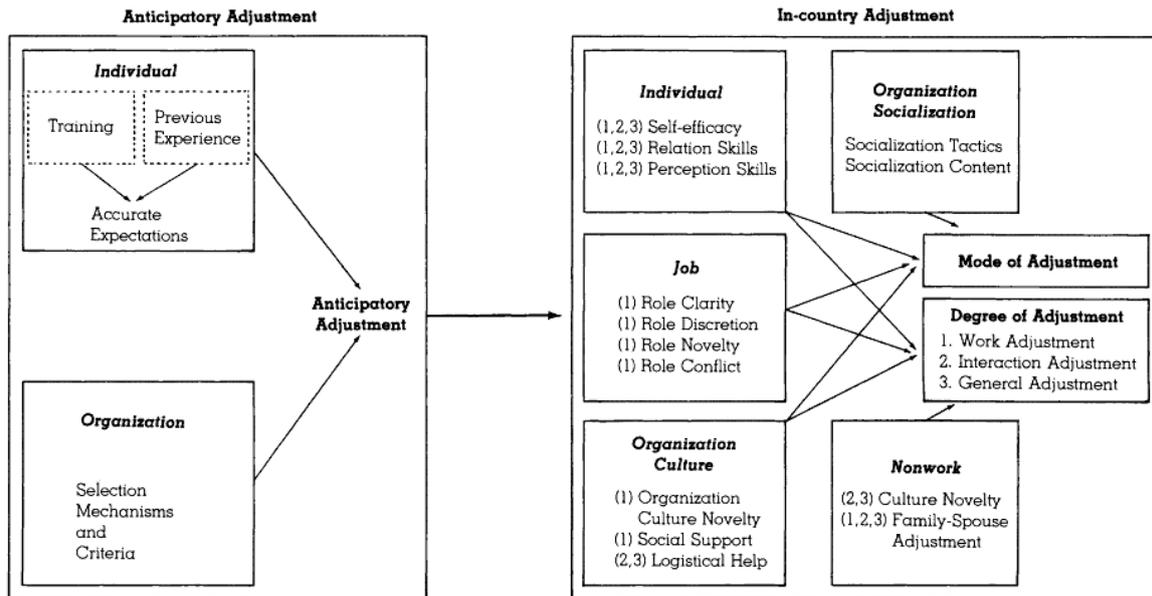
With more organizations of all sizes engaging in the global economy, more people are being asked to work *ex patria*. As the field research highlights (GMAC, 2006), these expatriates (*ex patria* for a minimum of one year) receive premium compensation packages, yet failure rates, expatriates who leave their assignment prematurely, are in the 25 per cent range. Not only do direct financial costs exist, indirect costs to organizations and a potential cost to the failed expat also exist. The aforementioned description of the expatriate dilemma echoes the frustration that led Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) to present their 'Framework of International Adjustment' seventeen years ago. This research seeks to describe a taxonomy of variables, which differentiates the successful from the unsuccessful expat.

This paper first explores Black, Mendenhall and Oddou's (1991) seminal framework of international adjustment. Then, this paper suggests an alternate framework that may prove fruitful in exploring expat attrition, Schneider's (1987) Attraction Selection Attrition (ASA) framework. To conclude, this developmental paper will suggest an alternate methodology that may provide new insights.

Framework of International Adjustment

To address a situation similar to the one outlined in the introduction coupled with frustration over the anecdotal nature of international adjustment research at the time, Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou (1991) developed their framework (figure 1). To create this framework, they first reviewed the domestic adjustment literature selecting research from relevant domains (e.g. socialization). They then selected 'main themes' from the underdeveloped international adjustment research. Finally, they welded the two bodies of research together to create their framework of international adjustment. They noted the common thread of the bodies of literature was a person's desire to reduce uncertainty in a new situation. International adjustment was a social learning process.

Framework of International Adjustment^a



^a Numbers in parentheses indicate the numbered facet(s) of adjustment to which the specific variable is expected to relate.

Figure 1: Framework of international adjustment

Their framework (Fig. 1) outlines a comprehensive set of pre-entry and in-country variables and facets that influence one's eventual (un)successful adjustment on a foreign assignment. Adjustment is a two-fold concept. Firstly, the mode of adjustment (how a person adjusts to the work role change) is important. Will the expat change to fit the new situation or will they change the situation to fit their self? Besides the person, the job, the organization culture and organization socialization practices affect the mode of adjustment. Second, degree (amount) of adjustment to one's work environment, interacting with the locals, and the general environment affects one's adjustment.

Pre-departure selection and training is the first step critical to adjustment on a foreign posting. However, once on the posting, four variables and their (facets) are considered key to degree of adjustment. Firstly, individual qualities include self-efficacy, relational abilities (ability/willingness to interact with host nationals), and perceptual skills (ability to learn how to behave in the new nation). Second, job factors considered important include job role clarity (Why are they there?), role discretion (freedom to adapt the post to novel situations), role novelty (how different from previous roles is this foreign post?) and role conflict (conflicting signals between the home and host organization). Third, critical organizational culture factors include organization culture novelty (How similar is the new organization culture to the home one), social support from coworkers and superiors, and logistical support (day-to-day living). Finally, two non-work factors, family adjustment and support, and cultural novelty (similarity between the two countries' customs/behaviors) influence one's degree of adjustment. Although Black et al's (1991) framework of international adjustment is quite comprehensive in scope, it does have flaws.

Critique of Black, Medenhall, and Oddou

Thomas and Lazarova (2006) note the complete framework has not been verified; therefore, this paper relies on the findings of two meta-analyses of the components of Black et al's (1991) framework. When Black et al's (1991) framework of expat adjustment is evaluated, its

validity is unclear. Only social factors (role of family and spouse, role clarity and relational skills) emerge as important to adjustment in both studies (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al, 2005; Hechanova et al, 2003). Issues with the research that underpins Black et al's (1991) framework and the concerns noted by the authors of the meta-analyses suggest several reasons why there may be limited support.

Many studies lack control groups, often suffer from common method variance issues and use small samples (both n = individual study and k = meta-analysis studies). In their 1991 article, Black and Mendenhall presented studies that led them to draw on social learning theory to underpin their framework. There four concerns with these studies. Firstly, fifteen of the eighteen studies rely on student samples, which is a problem when Black et al (1991) is a framework for international business. Second, many of the studies were interviews upon departure or return with participants often asked for details of their adjustment well after the fact. Third, although most studies included statistics, only one reached statistical significance yet they drew conclusions from these 'almost significant' results. Finally, they never define expatriate.

Researchers such as Bandura (2002), Earley (2006) and Hurn (2006) note that exploring the person interacting with their organization may provide new insights.

Schneider's Attraction Selection Attrition Framework

Schneider's (1987) Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) framework describes how people are attracted to, selected into, and remain with or leave (attrition) an organization. How a person fits their organization rests on interaction psychology, the person interacts with and interprets their interaction with an environment to give it meaning. Because it is a model about people interpreting within a social situation, Schneider is exploring social cognition (as was Black et al, 1991) (Schneider, 1987a, 1987b).

Schneider (1987) suggested the people decide if they fit with an organization and leave if they do not. Building on Schneider's conceptualization of Person-Organization (PO) fit, Muchinsky and Monahan (1987) suggested that PO fit could occur in two ways. It was *Complementary*, the Person or Organization adds something unique to help the other fulfil its needs, or PO fit is *Supplementary*, the Person and Organization share similar characteristics or values. Kristof (1996) expanded the concept of PO fit by suggesting Complementary fit is two-sided and Muchinsky and Monahan (1987) had been describing one side, *demands-abilities fit*; i.e. an individual adds to the organizational needs. Kristof (1996) noted the other side is *needs-supplies fit*; i.e. an individual's needs are met by the organization.

Critique of PO fit

Meta-analyses by Hoffman and Woehr (2006); Kristof (1996); Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson (2005); and Verquer, Beehr & Wagner (2003) highlight the complexity and elusiveness of the PO fit concept. Depending on what and how PO fit is measured, the outcomes will vary. Is it a behavioral outcome (e.g. quit) or is it a cognitive intention (e.g. intention to quit) (Hoffman and Woehr, 2006; Verquer et al, 2003)? Kristof-Brown et al (2005) note that many studies use values; others use personality traits to explain fit. This also affects the measurement methods and outcomes of a fit study. Finally, Hoffman and Woehr (2006) suggest the method used to measure outcomes (Objective, Perceived or Subjective fit) will influence the findings of the study.

This research suggests fit is a subjective interpretation, a view that is supported by Schneider's original study (1987) and Judge's concluding chapter (Judge, 2007 in Ostroff & Judge, 2007) which attempts to distil the state of affairs of PO fit research. Linking to

Schneider's ASA framework, Judge suggests fit is a subjective individual perception and thus exploration should be moving to subjective methodologies.

Finally, Piasentin and Chapman (2006) reinforce the issue of subjective PO fit as a legitimate perspective. Their desire to measure multiple types of fit simultaneously is of particular relevance to the expat, as the international assignee appears to be a person where accommodating multiple types of fit is natural. They must adjust/fit with new people (supplementary fit) and usually they must also serve a demands-abilities purpose (e.g. transfer knowledge). Piasentin and Chapman (2006) note, subjective fit is an idiosyncratic interpretation. However, this is not a concern as it complements Schneider's original framework of fit that drew on interaction psychology. Fit was a cognitive interpretation.

Expat/PO fit nexus

Cognitive psychology is the tie that binds the two frameworks together. Both use it to explain their respective frameworks. Both frameworks describe a dynamic process of interpretation; the person enters an organization, interacts with their surroundings, adapts (or not), and an outcome occurs (stay, leave, stay and underperform). Both frameworks are cross-level analysis and for this research, the person is also the level of interest. The person is asked to adjust or fit to an organization; the organization just happens to be in a different country.

Road forward

As was shown, despite seventeen years of research using Black et al's (1991) framework describing international adjustment, the attrition rate of expats remains around 25%. This suggests the framework is not capturing the experience satisfactorily. This research suggested some of the problem might be research has been focussing on the wrong level of analysis. Exploring PO fit in relation to expatriate assignment completion may prove more fruitful and Schneider's (1987) ASA framework was suggested as an alternative. This paper suggested both fit and adjustment are similar concepts based on social cognition. To conclude, this paper provides an alternate methodology to explore the person – international assignment nexus that may lead to new insights.

Causal mapping offers such a potential (Eden and Spender, 1998; Hodkinson, Maule, & Brown, 2004). This methodology allows us to address the "gap in our conceptual understanding of what underlies individuals' evaluations of fit" (pg. 215, Piasentin and Chapman, 2006). It addresses Judge's suggestion and it is a methodology that has been deployed successfully by Billsberry et al (2004, 2005a, 2005b) to research subjective PO fit. Mallory, Yang, and Ray (2008) have used this methodology to explore international decision-making.

Causal mapping allows for a rich idiographic description of the expat's experience and subsequent decision to stay or leave. This methodology allows for the deconstruction of subjective fit into its component parts and interactions thus addressing the concern raised by researchers such as Edwards (Edwards, in Ostoff and Judge, 2007) that subjective fit tends to be viewed as an omnibus measure. The strength of this approach is the subject (expat) drives the process. They determine what is important, how the factors interact, and they weight their importance.

This methodology stays true to the original subjective conceptualization of PO fit enunciated by Schneider (1987), allows for a rich description of what the expatriate describes as important to success, has been used in similar studies, and offers an opportunity to create subjective measures with non-omnibus outcomes. This method allows for the eventual

quantification of information that will allow for the development of an idiographic perspective (Bem and Funder, 1978; Krahe, 1992).

Conclusion

This paper has briefly outlined the traditional path followed when pursuing expatriate research. It highlighted some of the major concerns with Black et al's (1991) framework of international adjustment and suggested Schneider's (1987) Attraction Selection Attrition framework may be more fruitful. Finally, this paper has presented an alternate perspective not applied to the expat research previously.

As has been noted in this paper, more and more people are being asked to work *ex patria*. Despite years of research relying on Black et al (1991), the attrition rate remains at approximately 25 %. This represents enormous costs to both organizations and the individual and thus the suggestion to try another path.

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