Expanding horizons and expatriate adjustment: Perceptions of Western expatriate managers in multinational companies in the United Arab Emirates

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Cross Cultural & Strategic Management
ISSN: 2059-5794
Publication date: 6 August 2018

Abstract

Purpose
Expatriate management is a popular theme in the field of international human resource management in light of the fact that expatriates play a crucial role in a MNC's global operations. The purpose of this paper is to explore how MNCs select, train, deploy and support expatriate managers during and after their international assignment in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Design/methodology/approach
This qualitative study is based on in-depth interviews with 22 Western expatriate managers who are presently based in the UAE. However, in order to ensure a diverse sample among the participants with regards to their age, professional experience, gender and nationality, purposeful sampling was utilized while selecting the participants.

Findings
The results of the present study cast light on many shortcomings of the overall expatriation process as they are implemented by MNCs in the UAE. Accordingly, there is a pressing need for MNCs in the UAE to develop strategic expatriation processes, involving the following critical factors: the selection of the right person for the right job; specific and relevant pre-departure and post-arrival cross-cultural training (CCT); practical support for the expatriate employees and their trailing spouses in the host country; and lastly, a clear repatriation strategy to mark a successful conclusion of foreign assignments in the UAE.

Research limitations/implications
It is acknowledged that the results of this purely qualitative study, based on a relatively small sample size, cannot claim to represent the management theories, practices and realities of all the Western MNCs in the UAE. Moreover, these findings narrate the views and perceptions of this particular cohort of expatriate executives with relation to their selection, pre-departure CCT, adjustment in the UAE and the support and repatriation policies utilized by their companies for doing business in the UAE.

Practical implications
This study points to the fact that technical skills are mostly considered to be the predominant selection criteria for the expatriate selections in the MNCs. Other abilities, such as language skills and relational and perceptual adjustability are considered to be less important and do not feature overtly in the selection criteria for expatriate positions. The results demonstrate that distinctive features of adjustability, which include expatriates' willingness to communicate, their social orientation, dynamic anxiety resistance and openness ability are all critical to the adjustment in the host country and should be given more emphasis.

Originality/value
Regardless of the presence of numerous MNCs in the UAE, it is indeed surprising to see that the topic of the expatriation management process in MNCs in the UAE has received little research attention. The objective of this study is to address this deficiency. Additionally, it is hoped that these findings may also be valuable to MNCs and consultants who are preparing expatriates for international assignments, especially in the Middle East and in particular in the UAE.

Keywords
Expatriates, UAE, Expatriate management, Global assignment, Multinational companies

Citation

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