

Running Head: ON EXPATRIATE EFFECTIVENESS AND GOOFY CRITERIA

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Abstract

While performance is quintessential to assessing expatriate effectiveness, significant domestic advances in performance measurement have seldom been applied to evaluating expatriate training and selection practices. In addition to a critical assessment of expatriate effectiveness research, this theoretical paper voices concerns about the conversion of domestic performance taxonomies, and offers solutions.

## On expatriate effectiveness and Goofy Criteria

## Are the Fruits of Four Centuries of Contemplation About Expatriate Effectiveness

## Sweet?

On March 24, 1602, the world's first multinational company (MNC) ("A fine place to be," 2002) was established in the Netherlands in the form of the *United East India Company* (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie; V.O.C.). As such, the V.O.C. was one of the first commercial organizations to send 'expatriates' abroad: it was responsible for expatriating nearly 1 million mostly Dutch and German employees to Asia between 1602 and 1795 (Van Gelder, 1997). Intriguingly, Trevenot, the pseudonym of an unknown German author of an obscure 18<sup>th</sup> century text, sketched a profile of the ideal candidate:

"Those who have in their home countries, endured hardship and ill fortune"...

"those who have suffered hunger and thirst, who can work sedulously, who are patient and consider the harsh boat life to be more endurable than the adversity on the shore, those are the kind of people needed by the Company". The author continues with the assertion that the V.O.C. employees enjoy what tastes bitter and sour to others, as if it were the greatest delicacy. "They are content when they can perform their duties and thank God when they obtain a piece of bread" (Trevenot, as cited in Van Gelder, 1997, p.11).

Judging from the atrocious company-sanctioned hostility and brutality that these expatriates inflicted on local communities, it is hardly surprising that criteria that have come into vogue more recently, such as intercultural interaction (Clarke & Hammer, 1995; Hawes & Kealey, 1981; Kealey, 1989), did not exactly top the list. In

contrast to V.O.C. times, many of today's MNC's seem genuinely concerned about the fruitfulness of the interaction between expatriates and members of local communities. This is corroborated by a recent worldwide survey, which showed that on average MNC's spend about USD 4,200 per expatriate on cross-cultural preparation (Windham-International, 2001). With a growing demand for effective expatriates came the arduous task to define what expatriate effectiveness is, and more importantly, to find ways of predicting and training it. Unfortunately, more than five decades of research on the topic (see Bhawuk & Brislin, 2000; Paige & Martin, 1996, for overviews) has failed to yield a clear and explicit knowledge structure of what it is we should be training and selecting for (Arthur & Bennett, 1995). In his literature review Kealey (1996) too, identifies this problem when he states that "there remains a dearth of solid empirical research that defines and describes concretely and comprehensively the outcome behavior demonstrated by successful intercultural personnel" (p. 92). A more recent review of international management research, published between 1996 and 2000 inclusive, concluded that few studies have looked at expatriate performance or other behavioral consequences (Werner, 2002). Ones and Viswesvaran (1997) state that "the problem of the criterion has been almost more retarding an issue in the expatriate literature...than it has been in most domestic (within culture) studies in industrial/organizational psychology" (p. 75). Empirical evidence for the paucity of studies that address expatriate performance, which in our opinion should be considered the focal operationalization of expatriate effectiveness, is provided by a recent meta-analysis of antecedents and consequences of employees' adjustment to overseas assignments (Alampay, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2002), which included only two studies that actually assessed performance. From an organizational perspective, an exploratory study among U.S. multinational firms, which examined

expatriate performance appraisal (EPA) practices and their perceived accuracy, found that the use of multiple types of criteria (i.e., soft, hard and contextual), increased numbers of raters, balance of within host- and outside host-country raters, and frequency of appraisal were all positively related to *perceived* EPA accuracy, but seldom implemented (Gregersen, Hite, & Black, 1996). With so many authors acknowledging the issue and so few researchers addressing it, perhaps the time has come to critically reassess our criterion development strategy.

The purpose of this theoretical paper is to delineate an innovative approach to defining and constructing criteria for the optimal assessment of expatriate effectiveness. It will be contended that the realm of expatriate effectiveness has become saturated with a plethora of criteria of questionable utility and/or suspect methodological rigor. Subsequently, it will be argued that a number of conventions and assumptions that have stood at the heart of previous research efforts have impeded the development of criteria that have been able to find their way out of academia and into the HRM departments of MNC's. An overhaul of these core issues and their integration with recent perspectives from the personnel selection literature will result in various propositions for future research within the domain of expatriate effectiveness. Research based on these propositions should serve to redress the current state of affairs.

#### What is Amiss With Currently Available Criteria of Expatriate Effectiveness?

Over the last five decades or so, a myriad of variables relating to expatriate effectiveness have appeared within the extant literature (see Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Dinges & Baldwin, 1996; Kealey, 1996; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985, for reviews), examples of which are adaptation and social isolation (Hullett & Witte, 2001). Causal relationships between such criteria and job performance are more often

assumed than empirically investigated. And when performance measures are included as criteria in an empirical study of expatriate effectiveness, they often appear to be lacking in methodological rigor. For example, although performance was assessed in Spreitzer, McCall, and Mahoney's (1997) study, they themselves were careful to point out that their one item performance measure was subject to common method variance because it was assessed by the same person and at the same time as the predictor measure. Because of this, a second performance measure (in the form of external performance appraisal data that were only available for a holdout sample) was included, but the small sample size ( $n=56$ ) limited the ability to detect significant relationships (although some were found). In another study among expatriates of a U.S. MNC (Caligiuri, 2000), the supervisor was asked to make an overall assessment of the expatriate's job performance. Although the Big Five as a group significantly predicted this performance measure, only 9% of the variance in performance was accounted for, which appears to be a replication of the domestic meta-analytic finding that personality correlates only moderately with overall job performance (see for example Barrick & Mount, 1991). It is very likely that the domestic finding that personality relates higher to the contextual domain of job performance than to overall job performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997) may generalize to an expatriate context. In essence this finding is an empirical illustration of the notion that increased specificity in the job performance domain is needed for meeting key research challenges (Tett, Guterman, Bleier, & Murphy, 2000), an issue that will be discussed in greater detail below.

In summary, although many studies have been conducted within the field of expatriate effectiveness, few have addressed the most unequivocal candidate criterion, namely performance, and those that have, appear to be lacking in methodological

rigor. What the field needs is consensus on an operational definition of expatriate effectiveness, and the methodology to be employed in predicting and/or training it. In order to reach a compelling operational definition, the core issues inherent to research pertaining to expatriate performance will now be critically examined.

#### Core Issues in the Development of Criteria for Expatriate Effectiveness

##### *On being versus not being a criterion measure of expatriate effectiveness*

As was discussed earlier, the often implicit assumption that existing operational definitions of expatriate effectiveness criteria will affect performance is widespread and seldom empirically investigated. Austin and Villanova (1992) defined the term criterion as “a *sample of performance* [italics added] (including behavior and outcomes), measured directly or indirectly, perceived to be of value to organizational constituencies for facilitating decisions about predictors or programs” (p. 838).

Based on the above definition, one could argue that many of the dependent variables that have been employed within the field of expatriate effectiveness to date are at best intermediate variables (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997; Sinangil & Ones, 2001), because evidently they do not sample performance (Arthur & Bennett, 1995; Kealey, 1996; Werner, 2002) nor are they perceived to be valuable by organizational constituencies (Arthur & Bennett, 1995; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). Ultimately, variables such as spousal adjustment (Black & Gregersen, 1991), ability to establish intercultural relationships (Hammer, 1987; Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wiseman, 1978), or the number of languages spoken (Spreitzer et al., 1997), become relevant and useful to MNC's only upon having been shown to actually relate to performance. In legal terms, an organization would be hard-pressed justifying the rejection of an applicant purely on the basis of the prediction that his or her spouse will not be able to adjust. Although to our knowledge no data exist about the relationship between

spousal adjustment and expatriate performance, no conformation was found for the hypothesis that *spousal support* would relate to expatriate work and general adjustment in a recent study of expatriate sources of support, and correlations with expatriate task and contextual performance were negligible (Kraimer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001). Unfortunately, task and contextual performance were only assessed by six items within this study, which casts doubt on the adequacy with which the performance domain was sampled (Binning & Barrett, 1989).

In conclusion, in the prediction and training of expatriate effectiveness, the ultimate criterion is job performance. Campbell (1990) defines performance as a set of behaviors that are relevant for the goals of the organization, and effectiveness as the outcomes that stem from these behaviors. Translating this definition to the realm of expatriates, a definition for expatriate effectiveness is the extent to which the expatriate's job performance reflects behaviors that are relevant to the organization's goals. Having discussed the necessity of developing proper performance criteria for expatriate selection and training practices, let us now examine strategies that researchers may employ in assessing them.

*How may the intercultural performance domain be modeled?*

It has been argued elsewhere (Sinangil & Ones, 2001) that the existing literature in the realm of domestic job performance, such as the well known taxonomies developed by Campbell and colleagues (Campbell, 1990; Campbell, Gasser, & Oswald, 1996; Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, & Sager, 1993), Viswesvaran and colleagues (Viswesvaran, 1993; Viswesvaran & Ones, 2000; Viswesvaran, Schmidt, & Ones, 1994; Viswesvaran, Schmidt, & Ones, 1996) and Borman and Motowidlo (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993, 1997) are applicable to defining and measuring expatriate job performance. On the basis of their review of these models



Sinangil and Ones (2001) depict a working model of expatriate job performance that consists of nine dimensions. Ones and Viswesvaran (1997) too, suggested ways in which their domestically developed taxonomy might be relevant specifically to expatriates. For researchers interested in applying these models to expatriate effectiveness, it might be prudent to take notice of the fact that within a domestic context there is an ongoing discussion concerning the premises on which they were built. The recent summary of this discussion (see Tett et al., 2000) as it relates to expatriate effectiveness will be portrayed in the next few paragraphs. Subsequently, the 'hyperdimensional' taxonomy of managerial competence (Tett et al., 2000) will be reviewed and its implications for capturing expatriate performance variability will be discussed. Finally, the domestic concept of adaptive performance (Allworth & Hesketh, 1998; Hesketh, Allworth, & Considine, 1996; Hesketh & Neal, 1999) will be mentioned briefly.

As was briefly touched upon earlier, Tett et al. (2000) have evocatively argued for more specificity in the job performance domain. In particular, they contend that increased specificity will result in a more refined person-situation fit, a more complete understanding of causes, effects and measurement, and greater construct specificity than what the generalist performance models have to offer. Central to this argument is the so-called fidelity-bandwidth tradeoff, in which, given the practical restrictions on test length, fidelity (i.e., construct measurement precision) is negatively related to bandwidth (i.e., the number of separate constructs assessed by a measure). On the basis of their summary of the recent discussion relating to this tradeoff and its implications for the specificity-generality distinction in matching people to jobs, Tett et al. infer the following: a) predictive accuracy may be improved with the use of more specific and articulate performance measures; b) complexity with respect to

content must be matched between the criterion and predictor spaces; c) specific measures, even if they are relatively short are not by definition less reliable; and finally, d) distinct measures of specific relevant constructs are likely to be more efficient because less time is spent measuring superfluous content.

The current state of affairs in modeling domestic managerial job performance is reflected in the 53 competencies that were subsequently delineated by Tett et al.. This comprehensive 'hyperdimensional' taxonomy was developed on the basis of earlier approaches and content validated by SME's. Disregarding the fact that not all expatriates are managers and not nearly all managers are expatriates, for the moment, their model seems to have potential in the elucidation of the expatriate performance domain. However, there are some other reservations that need to be explicated

A *10% rule*, which stated that a performance dimension could be a distinct competency only if that dimension was expected to be at least moderately important in at least 10% of managerial jobs, was employed by Tett et al. in distilling the competencies from the earlier models. Although Tett et al. state that this approach will disregard only the most obscure dimensions and jobs, the application of this rule by definition implies that a distinctive competency that is extremely important in even slightly less than 10% of managerial jobs will be excluded. The prospective work behaviors that are associated with the intercultural environment in which expatriates perform are likely to be prime examples of such competencies, because there are only a few jobs in which these behaviors play such a pivotal role. In this regard, Sinangil and Ones (2001) have noted that "perhaps the most important element that distinguish expatriate jobs from other high complexity and high responsibility jobs is an added element of complexity by the intercultural environment in which these jobs are performed." Succinctly, the hyperdimensional taxonomy of managerial competence

may not sample the totality of managerial job performance when applied to an expatriate population. This issue may be addressed in empirical research by clarifying expatriate performance as it relates to the organizational effectiveness of MNC's by conducting organizational needs analyses. A recent exploratory investigation among human resource specialists who managed expatriate performance appraisal, established that a balanced combination of raters from both within and outside the host country is *perceived* to result in the most accurate expatriate performance appraisals (Gregersen et al., 1996). Related research is currently being undertaken by the authors.

Another reservation about applying the hyperdimensional taxonomy of managerial competence to expatriates concerns the intercultural environment in which expatriates perform. For expatriates, the desirability of demonstrating certain competencies may depend on who they are dealing with. For example, in communicating with German clients and Japanese supervisors, organizational goals may be served best by demonstrating high and low initiative, respectively. Such, fluctuating desirability of competencies for expatriates may pose a serious threat to adequate performance appraisal. In assessing expatriate job performance it may thus be imperative to provide the cultural context, within which the prospective work behavior is to be exhibited.

Finally, research aimed at modeling expatriate job performance may stand to gain from applying the concept of adaptive performance, defined by Allworth Hesketh (1998) as those job behaviors that represent an individual's capacity to cope with change. This definition appears similar to traditional definitions of expatriate adjustment. However, because adaptive performance is anchored in job behaviors it is likely to be more adequate for assessing expatriate effectiveness. Results from several

studies have shown that adaptive performance was predicted by constructs different from those relevant to task and contextual performance (Allworth & Hesketh, 1998; Hesketh et al., 1996). To the authors' knowledge no studies have been conducted to examine whether this finding generalized to other taxonomies of job performance.

#### Discussion

Expatriate job performance may be considered the ultimate criterion in the prediction and training of expatriate effectiveness. The recently developed domestic models of job performance that were discussed within this paper may prove to be an extremely valuable guide to the study of expatriate effectiveness. Although there are methodological concerns associated with applying these models in an intercultural environment, it is our opinion that these are not unsurpassable. This paper was aimed at highlighting some major concerns that are intrinsically related to the prediction and training of expatriate effectiveness. Although expatriate failure rates, frequently defined as premature re-entry, are probably not much higher than domestic turnover rates (Harzing, 1995), the consequences of failure for expatriates, family members and MNC's are much greater. If delineating performance criteria for the selection of domestic employees is important, it surely is crucial for expatriates.

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