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Female Expatriates & Alternative Portfolio Assignments: The New Directions of Expatriation

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2016

Abstract

Even though businesses have been using expatriates for the better part of a century, they still have not tapped into all of the potential value that is contained in sending managers abroad. The typical practice of moving a worker to a foreign country for a long-term position has added great value to organizations but also come at great costs. These international assignments see a relatively high failure rate of anywhere between thirty to fifty percent, and since the costs associated with this type of assignment are rather extensive, the problems associated with them need to be addressed (“When did globalization start?”, 2013). With a global marketplace that is becoming more and more interdependent, the traditional expatriate assignment no longer meets the needs of international organizations; through the use of alternative forms of assignment and the expanding use of female international managers, however, multinational corporations can meet this dilemma head on.

Keywords: *expatriation, female expatriates, alternative forms of international assignment*



Introduction

In the year 1492 when Christopher Columbus set foot on the islands of the Bahamas, he had no idea the ramifications this feat would have on the world around him. What followed was a rapid expansion into the New World and the opening of endless doors of trade and commerce. With a viable link between Europe and the Americas, explorers had set the stage for what would become one of the fastest growing commercial trends in economic history: international trade and globalization. While the trade and transport of goods were the main export for most countries for about the next four centuries, in the early 1900s business began to see the value in not only sending physical goods and capital overseas, but human capital as well.

The term expatriate has been used since European settlers began coming to the Americas and has gone through a great deal of change in its definition since then. It was originally thought of simply as someone leaving his or her home country and coming to America for the use of nation building. The definition of expatriate through the Expatriate Act of 1868 declared, “the right of expatriation to be a natural and inherent right of all people, indispensable to the enjoyment of the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Green, 2009, p. 314). This definition, by our standards was essentially an immigration law that allowed for foreigners to enter the U.S. As the 1900s approached, and the U.S. continued to grow as a world player, the United States passed the Expatriation Act of 1907. This sets a new standard for the expatriate; “the expatriate was now defined as someone leaving America, whether for love (American women marrying foreign men), for money (naturalized businessmen staying away too long), or just to write, although only the first two could be legally excluded from citizenship” (Green, 2009 p. 310). This deals most directly with the social phenomenon of females marrying foreigners and leaving to live in their spouse’s native country as well as a mass exodus of writers and artists to Paris in the 1920s. Natural born Americans were now at threat of losing their citizenship if they remained for two years in their native country or five years in any foreign land and were in many cases disdained for their questionable allegiance to their country.

As this trend of Americans living and in some cases working abroad began to become more popular following WWII and with the expansion of major U.S. oil companies taking their exploration, extraction, and refining processes abroad it was clear that business would soon meet this legal conundrum and there was need for a change of this definition of expatriate (Lomax, 2001, p. 33). Up to this point, the term expatriate had been one of blatant exclusion from a country if an individual fell into this category. The definition was about to take a drastic turn. In 1967 the U.S. Supreme Court case of *Afroyin v. Rusk* found that, “expatriation must be the clear result of an individual’s voluntary intent to relinquish citizenship, and that the party alleging expatriation, that is the government, has the burden of proof: ‘In our country people are sovereign and the Government cannot sever its relationship to the people by taking away their citizenship’” (Green, 2009, p. 323). The term’s definition had now shifted from that of banishment to that of voluntary leave. As well as the progressive shift in the legal context, in the business world, organizations began to send managers abroad for international assignments. These positions were often considered ones of privilege due to allowances and bonuses associated with their assignment; the negative connotation once associated with expatriate was now replaced with that of privilege. The *Afroyin* ruling was key in ensuring that expatriates would not be at risk of losing their nationality and rights associated with citizenship during their time abroad.

It is ironic, that from its earliest legal inception in America, that the term “expatriate” has most notably been used to describe women. It is ironic in the fact that in 1907 this term was used to try and exclude women from American nationality, and dub them as expatriates, while today we are still



struggling to do the same thing but for very different reasons. Today, we are struggling to tap into the potential of talented female managers on an international scale; currently the expatriate workforce is comprised of between only 12-15% female managers (Lomax, 2001, p. 36). In a field with such a growing demand for talent this statistic seems astounding, as it should: “the participation of women in international management remains relatively low despite growing shortages of international managers” (Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007, p. 201).

Globalization as we know it today has been driven by, “the sudden increase in the exchange of knowledge, trade and capital around the world, driven by technological innovation, from the Internet to shipping containers” (“When did globalization start?”, 2013). It is true that although we have come a long way from the times of Adam Smith and a slowly emerging international marketplace, we are still lacking in a few fundamental areas. Even though businesses have been using expatriates for the better part of a century, they still have not tapped into all of the potential value that is contained in sending managers abroad. The typical practice of moving a worker to a foreign country for a long-term position has added great value to organizations but also come at great costs. These international assignments see a relatively high failure rate of anywhere between thirty to fifty percent, and since the costs associated with this type of assignment are rather extensive, the problems associated with them need to be addressed (“When did globalization start?”, 2013). With a global marketplace that is becoming more and more interdependent, the traditional expatriate assignment no longer meets the needs of international organizations; through the use of alternative forms of assignment and the expanding use of female international managers, however, multinational corporations can meet this dilemma head on.

Traditional expatriate assignments

In today’s global marketplace, what is known as the ‘traditional’ expatriate assignment is losing its practicality. A traditional assignment is typically one in which a manager is sent abroad to live and work at a foreign subsidiary or branch typically for a length of three to five years (Meyskens, 2009, p. 1441). It is important to note that the word ‘traditional’ does not necessarily mean old in this context; simply they were the first type of international assignment implemented in this field. Due to the long-term nature of these assignments, employees are required to uproot their domestic lives and often their families. They are then tasked with the difficult challenge of not only adapting to their newfound international business world, but also a society and culture to which they are foreign. While some organizations help managers make this transition to the best of their ability, many are still left at times to fend for themselves in unfamiliar circumstances.

One of the main ideas behind the use of the traditional expatriate assignment is that of a knowledge transfer. That is taking the knowledge and skills developed at the home country headquarters by the employee and diffusing this knowledge into the local foreign branches to which they are assigned. MNCs have three major purposes for using expatriates: “to fill international positions when qualified locals are not available, for management development, and to help control, coordinate, and assist in the transfer of a firm’s culture” (Morely, 2006, pg. 1). Typically, male managers who travel from organizational HQ to a local branch in need of their services have filled these traditional assignments, upon the organization’s request.

As globalization has grown rapidly, however, the traditional assignment has evolved in terms of its functions and its appearance. Although the oldest form of expatriate assignment, it has evolved with the times and is still used quite frequently. This is the reason for the examination of today’s ‘traditional’ assignment, and how it has evolved in to fit the needs of a growing global economy. According to a 1999 Global Relocation Trends survey, the top five reasons for using expatriates are to: fill a skills gap, launch a new endeavor, transfer technology, build management experience, and to transfer corporate culture



(Lomax, 2001, pg. 31). As there are many business needs while on an international assignment, expatriates must be able to wear a variety of business “hats” and have great understanding of both their individual and organizational goals as they pertain to their assignment. Being thrown into brand new surroundings, with colleagues with whom an employee is not familiar, is bound to bring about some difficulties for both the organization and employee. These issues have become an area of criticism for the traditional long-term international assignment and are the subject of much research.

While the needs of businesses grow and change, so too must the types of international assignments that are offered. It is due to these changes, as well as a slew of issues that have plagued the traditional form of international assignment that have led to the increasing use in various forms of international portfolio assignments. The traditional assignment, while still widely used by MNCs today, is on its way out: According to the Global Relocation Trends 1999 Survey report, in 1993 the standard term of an international assignment was three years, but by 1996 only about 32% of assignments were lasting three years or longer. This trend has continued over recent years and by 2001, less than ¼ of international assignments were for a duration of three years or longer (Lomax, 2001, p. 49-50). What are these issues plaguing the use of traditional long-term assignments? While there are a number of related issues, the main literature and research seem to focus on four themes in assignment failure: cost, culture shock and family adjustment, selection and recruitment, and repatriation.

Problems with traditional assignments

Since its inception, a key issue with expatriation has been that of the large costs of the position. The traditional long-term assignment has been founded on the basis of using a balance sheet approach when it comes to expenses and salaries of expatriates. The balance sheet breaks down an expatriate’s compensation into four categories: taxes, housing, goods and services, and reserves (Global Expatriate, 2012). Salary is determined in the home organization, adjusted to reflect typical consumption patterns in the home country and again adjusted to the foreign country to which they are assigned. The main goal of the balance sheet, according to the Society for Human Resource Management, is: “to pay an expatriate comparably to incumbents in same or similar positions in home country...the expatriate neither gains nor loses from a financial perspective” (“Global Expatriate”, 2012). This approach is far and away the most common, but it does not come cheap. Due to the many expenses that come with the traditional long-term relocation, the price tags on these assignments are estimated to cost anywhere between three to five times an employee’s home yearly salary (Selmer, 2001). In some instances these costs have reached as high as \$1,000,000 per year after benefits and the cost-of-living adjustment are taken into account (Black, 1999).

Expatriate failure & culture shock

In many cases organizations’ greatest expense goes toward their human capital. Why is it then that the added cost of sending managers overseas should be of concern to organizations that are already used to spending millions or billions of dollars on their employees? The answer to this question is simple; the cost of failure at an international level can far exceed the cost of failure in a domestic managerial role. With failure rates in US MNCs reaching as high as 30-50% as is commonly cited and at a cost of almost \$2 billion a year, this quickly becomes an organizations top concern (“Expatriation: Why does it fail?”, 2014). The indirect costs of failure: damaged relationships, loss of market share, and the requests of parent country nationals be replaced with host country nationals, some argue are just as, if not more, damaging due to reputation loss on an international scale (Collings, 2006, p. 60). When an expatriate and his or her family is uprooted and moved to a new country the economic burden falls on the



shoulders of the employer. The cultural adjustment and establishing a normal life in this foreign land, however, is left to the expatriate and their family, in some cases with little assistance or guidance.

Stress comes with any new job. This is to be expected when being integrated to a new organization with a different culture, goals, and values compared to what an employee is familiar with. Not only do expatriates have to deal with these new business adjustments in their transition from home to host country but they have to deal with the much larger societal and cultural differences as well. Many times the reason for expatriate failure, or an expatriate returning to their home country before their assignment is completed, is due to the phenomenon of culture shock. Adler defines culture shock as the expatriate's reaction to a new, unpredictable, and therefore uncertain environment (Adler, 1975). Collings (2006, p. 181) goes on to elaborate on culture shock as being associated with a feeling of powerlessness due to the uncertainty that lies ahead: "At the beginning of the assignment many things are new and exciting, but after about three months difficulties begin to emerge". Along with the threat of expatriates returning home early due to culture shock there is often a risk to their effectiveness in the foreign branch. Culture shock, like many other workplace stressors studied in the field of human resource management (HRM) has symptoms associated with it that can be detrimental to productivity. According to a study carried out by Lane and Distefano, some symptoms include: fatigue, tension, anxiety, excessive concerns about hygiene, and more (Lane, 1992). These symptoms lessen as the foreigner adapts to their newfound way of life and after a few months begin to develop a more neutral, natural state (Collings, 2006, p. 181). This uncertainty is not all encompassing however, and over time culture shock will fade out. With proper cultural training and guidance firms can avoid this costly mistake and limit their expatriate failure

For an expatriate this shock is one that can be detrimental, but with the added stress of bringing a spouse and children along it is greatly expanded. Surveys show that either a spouse or children accompany about two-thirds of expatriates and about half of expatriates are in dual-career couples (Cole, 2011, p. 3). These factors create a whole new set of issues such as spousal employment and education for children. The transition period is the most difficult for families as they are adapting to their new way of life and this is the time during which failure can be a threat. While the manager has his or her business role with which he or she is familiar and can fit into, the families have no means of familiarity or purpose. Although the initial transfer can be rather daunting, many find the experience to be quiet fulfilling and worthwhile: "Expatriation does involve a major upheaval for the expatriate managers and their families; while it often proves to be a very positive experience in the long term for all concerned, the immediate transfer is frequently problematic" (Collings, 2006, p. 180).

Recruitment & selection

Another area plaguing the use of the traditional long-term assignment is that of recruitment and selection. The process for selection and recruitment regarding international assignments is one that is often very informal and not like traditional recruitment practices used in domestic human resource management. The majority of recruitment in fact, happens internally, and often occurs through word of mouth. Because of this there tends to be a very homogenous candidate pool for these assignments and organizations are not able to find the best possible candidate to fit their needs for this assignment. Collings also suggests that this is a reason that women are often overlooked, or not in the running for international assignments (2006, p. 180). This is supported by the fact that the majority of international managers are male, "A second key problem is that the participation of women in international management remains relatively low despite growing shortages of international managers" (Adler, 2002, p. 743-760). Also contributing to the lack of female candidates is the myth that women do not want to opportunity to take on challenging international assignments, which has been found to be completely



inaccurate (Solomon, 1998). The ignoring of qualified female candidates contributes to the already existing problems with selection and recruitment and greater exemplifies the shortcomings of common practices.

There are a slew of issues regarding recruitment and selection in the field of expatriation as a whole, not just in the traditional assignment setting but also in emerging alternative settings. This essay will not delve into this phenomenon of recruitment and selection in general, rather will look at proper practices that can be put in place to better recruit and attract qualified female candidates once overlooked for these roles. Nonetheless it is important to note, that in any HR setting, especially one that spans borders and cultures, if a business is to be successful, it must have effective recruiting and selection procedures to put key talent in the proper settings.

Repatriation

Finally, the last problem that plagues the use of the long-term assignment is the act of repatriation. Repatriation is the act of, "reentry into the domestic environment or organization" (Harvey, 1989). Unfortunately repatriation also tends to be one of the largest shortcomings for most international firms. This process is thought to be one that should be a much easier transition than the expatriation process itself and is therefore often overlooked. Culture shock is a problem that plagues the initial transition into expatriation, however re-entry shock is now becoming a more recognized issue. According to Shibuya, "studies dealing with the re-entry transition suggest that 're-entry shock' is as powerful as culture shock and that it causes more upheaval than the demands of the initial cross-cultural adjustment" (2004, p. 7). This problem is exemplified for those expatriates that move their families or are a member of a dual career couple. For spouses it is often difficult to find work and adjust to life abroad in itself. Upon return, it is often the case they do not have the necessary resources and assistance to transition back into their careers. It is the combination of both cultural shocks as well as the potential career issues for the employee returning to the parent company that make the repatriation process as difficult as it is.

There have been countless studies surrounding the act of repatriation and it has been found that this is phase of the expatriation process that is most commonly overlooked. According to a study by the Business International Corporation, "Repatriating executives from global assignments is a top management challenge that goes far beyond the superficial problems and costs of physical relocation" (Adler, 1997). When firms are spending upwards of 305 times the employees' home salary per year to send these managers abroad to gain developmental skills and bring them back into their headquarters upon their return, it is essential that firms make this process as seamless and successful as possible (Collings, 2007, p. 202). Where most firms fail in this realm is not being able to successfully reintegrate the talent into their offices because they have been away from the home office for at least two years and the position that they once held is no longer available. In fact, one study indicates that as many as 50% of expatriates leave their employers within two years after repatriation due to a number of factors including dissatisfaction, being appointed to a lower position than before their assignment, or a lack of employment security (Black, 1999).

These issues often associated with repatriation contribute to hesitation of accepting international assignments for some managers. As international human resource practitioners it is essential that proper repatriation processes and techniques are implemented to ensure that firms are getting the true value of the skills and insights gained during international assignments and that these are retained. These issues associated with being away from the parent-country office are often difficult to overcome even with proper practices in place and for this reason different assignments have become more popular. While these assignments are very different from one another in nature, they share one



common theme that is essential to counteracting this phenomenon of failed repatriation. They are shorter in length than their big brother, the traditional long-term assignment.

Alternative forms of expatriation

While these emerging alternatives are now beginning to gain greater recognition in the field of expatriation, they are by no means new in the world of international work. These have been around for almost as long as the traditional assignment but have become more popular in recent years, “While it is wrong to assume that these forms are all ‘new’ or ‘modern,’ there does seem to be some evidence, that for example, short-term assignment forms are growing as least as fast, and maybe faster than standard expatriation” (Bonache, 2010, p. 268). Part of the reason that these portfolio assignments are gaining ground is because they have less potential for failure, such as terminating the assignment early, culture shock, or the many issues surrounding repatriation. If an expatriate is not away from their headquarter location for as long of a time as the traditional assignment and maintain more frequent contact - as often occurs with these shorter, alternative assignments - it is less likely for them to become ‘lost in the shuffle’ when they return to their previous position upon the end of their assignment.

Short-term assignments

With the increase of technology and transportation, firms have been able to successfully integrate many alternative forms of international assignment. These emerging forms of assignment are short-term assignments, commuter assignments, business traveler assignments, virtual assignments, and finally permanent transfers. Each of these has its own benefits and drawbacks depending on the individual and organizational goals and some have been proven to be more useful than others. While it is not the focus of my research it is important to note the use of one of the newest form of assignment that is being seen more frequently now than in the past, the self-initiated assignment. As opposed to the company-assigned expatriate that was used to accomplish a business goal for a firm, “Self-initiated expatriates are professionals and managers who, unsupported by an organization, expatriate to seek work in a host country for an indefinite period, usually over a year” (Collings, 2007). Employees who are seeking skill development and overseas experience to increase their value as employees often seek the challenge of international assignments. This has helped to open the door for female expatriate candidates as well as helping to diminish some of the previous discussed recruiting and selection issues, however since the focus of this paper is on the use of company-assigned expatriates this is all I will cover regarding the phenomenon of self-initiated expatriates.

The short-term assignment is the most similar in structure to the traditional long-term assignment. Short-term assignments still involve moving to another country for the length of the assignment, however these do not always require the upheaval and movement of an assignees family. Because these assignments are shorter in length, typically lasting between one and twelve months, most expatriates choose not to uproot their families’ lives and go on the assignment alone. In addition, expatriates salary, pension, and social security benefits are often taken care of in their home country as well, which does at times lead to taxation issues for assignments lasting longer than six months (Collings, 2007, p. 205).

There are a number of assignments that would be more conducive to a short-term length than long-term assignments. In one study, multinational corporations stated that their main uses for short-term assignments were, “problem solving or skills transfer, for control purposes, and for managerial development” (Tahvanainen, 2005, p. 665). Some other suggested uses were for project-based assignments as well as knowledge transfer into new markets and local workforces. Clearly there are many possible uses for the short-term assignment but there are some setbacks or complications that



come along with it. Aside from the advantages of increased flexibility and cost effectiveness, some drawbacks other than tax complications include social and family strains on the assignee, visa and work permit issues, and the risk of failure at building effective relationships due to the short nature of the assignment (Tahvanainen & Suutari, 2005). Although there are both benefits and drawbacks to the short-term assignment structure, one undeniable fact is that they are far cheaper than the use of traditional assignments and can be just as effective.

Commuter assignments

The next emerging form of alternative assignment that businesses are taking advantage of is even shorter in nature and these are known as commuter assignments. These assignments entail weekly or bi-weekly travel from a home abase to a foreign subsidiary for a number of different business functions (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005). Because of the frequency of travel and short nature of these trips families often do not travel with the worker and there is lesser chance for any form of culture shock to take place. A common form of commuter assignment growing in use today, specifically in the oil industry is a rotational assignment. This occurs when a worker will be transported to an oilrig for a few weeks at a time and then return to work at the headquarters or home office. This is also becoming frequently used in Europe, known as Euro commuting, due to the ease of travel between countries. Some European firms consider frequent contact and Euro commuting as viable options in replacing expatriate transfers (Mayrhofer, 1997).

There are obvious benefits to using commuter assignments, its most appealing being the cost effective nature of not having to physically relocate a worker for an extended period of time. However, while good for use in the short term or on a project basis, commuter assignments have been known to have negative impacts on the lives of employees. A recent study indicated that, "there are serious concerns about the viability of commuter arrangements over an extended period of time due to the build up of stress from the intensive travel commitments and the impact on personal relationships" (Dowling, 2004, p. 68).

International business travel

Very similar in nature to commuter assignments is the idea of international business travelers. There has been some controversy as to whether these employees are even considered expatriates because there is no need for relocation. Additionally, these trips are not as regularly scheduled nor as long in duration as most commuter assignments. However, after establishing them as a viable alternative for expatriation in certain scenarios for MNCs, research supports that they should in fact be included in this list (Michailova, 2003). The primary uses for international business travel center around irregular specialized tasks such as board meetings, face-to-face business transactions, and maintaining personal relationships while managing subsidiary operations (Collings, 2006, p. 206). These are tasks that can be done in a short amount of time and do not require the high cost of relocating a worker and their family.

The obvious advantage of international business travel as it compares to traditional expatriation and even expatriation as a whole, is the cost effectiveness of travel compared to that of relocation. In Europe and Asia most capitals and major cities can be reached with in a relatively short amount of time for business needs and this saves both time and money for very busy international managers. Another advantage of business travel is no need for relocation of the worker. This creates less risk of culture shock for the worker and their family and limits the disruption in the lives of dual career couples or expatriates that have children. While an advantage, constant travel has been known to create stress in some workers and does place unexpected strains on relationships, specifically with dual career couples (Collings, 2006, p. 206). Although advantageous in some cases, this frequently used form of international



management is still somewhat criticized as it emerges as an alternative to traditional expatriation assignments.

Virtual work teams

Possibly the fastest emerging trend in the increasingly global business world is the use of virtual work teams. Both in domestic and international contexts, virtual work teams give professionals the opportunity to seamlessly collaborate regardless of the distances between their physical locations. In global virtual teams, the leader or international manager manages a team of international workers from one or more foreign subsidiaries remotely from their home location (Collings, 2007, p. 207). Despite the ease of using virtual work, global work teams are not used as much as one might imagine. In fact, in a 2005 study conducted by Pricewaterhouse Cooper only 4% of MNCs surveyed utilized these assignments (Pricewaterhouse Cooper, 2005). Some of the arguments against this type of work in the international realm are that it can be very difficult to manage international teams due to time differences and also the need for face-to-face communication when taking on these international assignments. The use of virtual work is a growing trend in the Human Resources field and is too broad to delve into here, but it is beginning to grow an international context.

Permanent transfer

The final alternative to the traditional long-term expatriate assignment is one that looks perhaps most similar to it, with the exception of the short-term assignment. This assignment is known as a permanent transfer or localization. Like long term assignments, permanent transfers involve the relocation of the assignee and their family; however this will most likely last longer than five years, the maximum normally associated with long-term expatriate assignments. A key difference between a traditional assignment and a permanent transfer however lies in the compensation, benefits, and taxation of the assignee. In a traditional assignment, depending on the length, these can be managed in the home country, host country, or a mixture if that is the best arrangement. In a permanent transfer situation, the worker is essentially going to work for the foreign subsidiary and cutting their affiliation with the home base and home country. Their compensation, benefits, and taxation will all occur in the host country and as a result workers are not given a budget (Collings, 2007). They will be paid in the new country a salary comparable to the standard of living they are accustomed to in their home country and will then essentially be on their own as far as expenses go. This can be a great cost-saver for multinationals that have many long-term expatriates on their payroll that could be localized as an alternative option. These localization practices have been around for as long as the traditional expatriate assignment and are still certainly a viable option for multinational corporations to use today.

Females in management

Although alternative work arrangements are becoming more and more prevalent in the world of expatriation today, there is still a major alternative to the traditional assignment that many multinational corporations are not taking advantage of. This alternative is the use of female expatriates. Female expatriates are far and away the most underutilized resource that international firms have at their disposal, "The 1999 NFTC survey shows that 13% of the current expat population is women" (Lomax, 2001, p. 36). While there are a number of possible reasons for this disparity between the use of male and female expatriates in international work, one of the largest obstacles women face is the disparity of domestic female managers compared to males. The 2004 Grant Thornton International Business Report found that female managers make up only 24% of the global management workforce. In



the United States, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics data, female managers made up approximately one-third of the management population (Bureau, 2007).

What is more alarming is that in the seven industrialized nations (including the United States) this percentage drops to 21% (Scott, 2014). According to research this hints that the US is in fact ahead of the average levels of females in management in most European countries, “Women make up 41% of the European work force, hold only 29% of all managerial jobs, about 2% of top management jobs and just 1% of board membership positions. At the same time in the US, women hold about 10% of board seats” (Kooskora, 2007, p. 71). While these numbers may be encouraging for the United States when comparing management to European numbers, as a whole we still remain very far from any sort of equality. Of top management positions in the United States in 2014, females held less than 9% even though they make up roughly 52% of the workforce (Warner, 2014a). Fortunately there does seem to be an upward trend in the developing BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries that see that statistic lying around 32%, giving hope to women outside of the US and Europe that there is room for positive growth and it is occurring (Scott, 2014).

Problems for females in expatriation

While this female inequality does seem to be an issue that is affecting more than just the United States, the numbers in the US are certainly jarring. Even though great strides have been made in the realms of closing the gender gap and decreasing sex discrimination, women are still facing difficulty overcoming the ‘glass ceiling’ that was once so prominent. There are a number of suggested factors contributing to the female management vs. female labor population disparity in organizations. A prominent one is the lack of structure and networks available for female workers in organizations. This is not to say that female work is unstructured, rather in these male-dominated firms, there are often less women in positions of leadership that can be mentors to younger female professionals to encourage and guide them on their career paths. While structural issues play a large role in the career advancements of female workers in the domestic sphere, there are certain issues that more directly affect those in international management. A few of these issues are considered females’ largest barriers in the world of international management as well as domestic advancement: recruitment, cultural barriers, and familial commitments.

These barriers in both international and domestic management seem to contribute to one another when examining the results of the 1996 Catalyst survey, “Women in Corporate Leadership,” “Almost 50% of *Fortune 500/Service 500* CEOs say international experience is crucial to upward movement” (Solomon, 1998). Without getting the opportunities to join upward management in their home countries, females often miss out on opportunities to take on challenging international assignments. While women face all of these issues on the domestic front, Berthoin-Antal and Izraeli state, “Probably the single most important hurdle for women in management in all industrialized countries is the persistent stereotype that associates management with being male” (Berthoin, 1993, p. 63). It is more than a single industry or firm issue that is holding women back, rather societal beliefs as a whole that have slowed their progress. Nonetheless, talented and determined women are still able to find success in the international management field despite the numerous challenges they face.

Recruitment & selection

The issue of recruitment and selection is the first problem area that research takes a focus on for women in this field. The lack of proper recruitment and selection methods for expatriation as a whole is a problem in and of itself, but this is exaggerated greatly when studying female expatriates. Since recruitment for traditional expatriate assignments is often done in an informal, “word-of-mouth”



manner through the circles of management and upper management, it is not surprising, that women, only making up 9% of the top management positions in the United States, are often not considered for these roles (Warner, 2014b). This domestic disparity leads directly into the international recruitment issue. According to one study, “home-country male managers perceive women as being different and not like themselves, so they tend not to select women for expatriate positions” (Linehan, 2002). Likeminded research suggests that those in charge of recruitment and selection often act with a high degree of uncertainty avoidance for these high-risk assignments. Therefore, managers select candidates similar to themselves (in this case male) because they believe they will have the most success. Additionally, poor quality relationships between female subordinates and male supervisors tend to restrict female’s willingness to approach management or request international assignments (Collings, 2006, p. 180). Because there are not clear channels that allow female expatriates access to international opportunities, it is unlikely that they will hear about an assignment nor be considered for one unless they seek out this type of work diligently

Myths surrounding female expatriates

A common myth contributing to this lack of inclusion is that female managers do not wish to pursue these types of challenging, international assignments. While this may be true for some, it is an extreme oversight for firms to assume this of all females. In fact, research suggests that, “male and females are equally interested in expatriate jobs and that marital status does not affect the acceptance of international assignments” (Lovelace, 2010, p. 748). Behind this misguided reasoning are two of the largest explanations for the lack of women in international work: the idea that foreign cultures will not value or take the female managers’ contributions seriously (so why would she want this position?) and she would not be interested in this assignment because of her family commitments or marital status. The preference of family norms and roles, however is unique to each individual and is something that should not be used by organizations to keep women out of these roles. Instead, an employees’ merit should speak for itself. These two ideas are both very flawed in their own ways and after conclusive research and studies have been all-but disproven.

Host-country prejudices toward women

First, the notion that host-country nationals will not be accepting of female expatriates is a topic of great discussion. The main flaw in this logic is that workers in the host-country will not hold female expatriates to the same standards or cultural norms that they do their female coworkers. Laura Simeone, a senior HR manager for Cisco systems states, “They’re foreign – and therefore not expected to conform to the same standards that local culture dictates for women...they aren’t in a subordinate position to men” (Solomon, 1998). While there may still be gender-bias present in these organizations, they do not appear to affect foreigners as drastically as they do local workers. Adler suggests that females’ multiple identities help to solve this dilemma, “she is seen as a manager in the first instance and as a foreigner and a woman only in the second instance” (Morely, 2006, p. 147). There will be cultural issues that female expatriates face, but they are something that all expatriates will face, men included. In fact, while all expatriates often times have issues adjusting to culture shock and may return home or end the assignment early, “women who have completed international assignments illustrate very little evidence of failure” (Collings, 2006, p. 180). With the extreme costs associated with sending managers abroad and then the even higher costs associated with failure, it is key that firms select the candidate with the most potential for success, regardless of gender.

Although rare, there are certain countries that female expatriates have been known to turn down assignments for more consistently than men. Research shows that the likelihood of acceptance for



international assignments is equal for males and females, “with the exception being that more women than men would decline an assignment in the Middle East because of Islamic traditions that are restrictive toward women” (Lovelace, 2010, p. 749). Additionally, although not meant to be prejudicial, some firms are more hesitant to send women on assignments in areas of hardship or places that they might be at greater risk than a male expatriate would be in order to ensure their safety (Dickman, 2011, p. 135). This reason is one that is very justifiable as safety should be of the utmost importance to the firm, regardless of the sex of the expatriate. While it may seem odd to Europeans and Americans, in some foreign cultures females will not be as safe as men in certain environments. Therefore, they are not considered for assignment to certain areas of the world with only their best interests in mind.

While it is apparent that the claims of cultural differences and prejudices restricting female expatriation do not have much supporting evidence, females still do face barriers that most men will not. Where these problems tend to occur are outside of the office and in social settings, situations where the female manager may be viewed first as a female instead of as a manager. Whether it be a networking event or business dinner, female expats have reported facing more difficult challenges in adjusting to societal norms in some cultures (Solomon, 1998). In many business settings around the world heavy alcohol consumption or traditional male sports such as golf can be the environment for making business deals and networking. Successful female international workers such as Nancy Laben, general counsel for Andersen Worldwide, and Laura Simeone have suggested that in these scenarios women need to be proactive in seeking out more gender-neutral events or take the initiative in setting up their own activities, “women are going to have to decide how to handle the situation before they get into it” (Solomon, 1998). There is some truth to the myth that cultural adjustment may be more difficult for women in male-dominated society in the social realm, however, in the professional setting, they are simply another manager that has to prove themselves to their new subordinates in order to be successful.

Female family role & conflict

The second thought backing the myth that female managers do not wish to take part in international work is because of the family commitments they may currently have or want in the future. Even though in the United States it is illegal to discriminate against employees based on their family status or plans, Izraeli and Zeira observe that there is a clear double standard, “whether single or married, the female international’s family status is presumed to be problematic” (Collings, 2006, p. 185). This claim is supported by the findings of the Global Relocation Survey Trends. When it comes to marital status, 71% of the expatriate population is married while, “married men outnumber married female expatriates nine to one; but single males outnumber single females only three to one” (Solomon, 1998). Married women with families obviously have more obstacles to overcome than single women, as do married men in comparison to single men.

Marital status is no reason for the extreme disparity of opportunities presented to women. Because of the stereotypical gender roles that surround families, female managers are in some cases even seen to be a liability, that is firms believe she is, “likely to neglect her career at the expense of her family at every possible opportunity” (Collings, 2006, p. 185). This, claim, once again, is an unsubstantiated myth driven by the traditional gender and child-rearing roles of the past that were once engrained in society. A society that has been rapidly evolving and breaking down these norms in America and all over the world. There is no place for these outdated views in the world of international management as it is apparent that they are no longer the norm in our domestic society.

The typical stereotype of a female driven household with male breadwinners is no longer the norm in today’s culture and therefore should not be the basis for selecting qualified female candidates



for these roles. Dual career couples have posed an interesting new dilemma and opportunity for females seeking challenging international work. Eleanor Haller-Jordan, managing director of the HR consulting firm, Paradigm Group has examined this emerging trend in expatriation, “with the rise of dual-career couples, companies obviously will need to confront this issue more directly...I think there have been some dated assumptions in terms of the willingness and ability of the male spouses to travel” (Solomon, 1998). It is never easy moving ones entire family to a new place, especially if it also means uprooting a spouses’ career, however when in search for the best talent, gender should not be an issue.

Some truth in these myths

Although it is true that marital status should have no bearing on potential candidates for expatriate work and merit should be the main consideration, there is some truth behind the worry of organizations about married female managers abroad. Empirical evidence suggests that due to organizational and family strains, female managers often take longer to adjust and settle in to their new assignment locations. Factors contributing to this phenomenon included balancing work and home life, settling kids into schools, and difficulty socializing due to cultural and societal norms. It is also noted, however, that, “despite the longer adjusting period, when female managers and their families have adjusted to their new locations, female international managers can be as successful or even more successful than their male counterparts” (Collings, 2006, p. 181). There is a plethora of research in the field suggesting the same; that female expatriates, as a whole, have relatively low failure rates and often find great success in their international assignments.

Culture shock & adjustment

Culture shock and adjustment are not easy tasks for families regardless of which parent is on the international assignment. The solution to the problem here lies in the hands of human resource professionals and policy makers in multinational corporations. There need to be better support systems in place for both the assignee, spouse, and family, and this assistance should go beyond merely relocation. Findings suggest that it is not marital status that affects females’ willingness to accept or find success in international work, rather it is children, “The difference in interest and willingness become apparent only when evaluating data for women with children and the women without. Women with children are less likely to accept international assignments” (Kooskora, 2007, p. 74). This makes it vital that there are proper support systems in place as well as trainings and resources made available to the entire family traveling. So, there is in fact some truth to the concern regarding family constraints, however, marital status is not the root of this concern. Family and organizational strain occur to men and women in both domestic and international roles alike, and when prepared for these issues, they can be overcome. While more stressful in an unfamiliar setting, and some stress levels are in fact seen to be higher in women, there is no sound evidence to suggest that these family commitments should hinder a female’s success in, or opportunity to pursue an international assignment.

Female expatriates & alternative assignments

Just as the traditional long-term assignment has begun to lose its usefulness in the past few decades so too has the traditional practice of excluding females from expatriation. Female managers are vital resources that firms cannot afford to overlook and by focusing on some of the alternative forms of assignment can be better utilized. According to Meyskens, “we can expect that the relative number of women taking part in alternative assignments (such as frequent flyer, short-term assignments and commuter) would be higher than the usual rate for traditional expatriation” (1997, p. 1447). Whether it is poor selection systems used by firms or the myths about family concerns surrounding female



candidates, research suggests that alternative assignments can help females to overcome these. Firms are also more willing to consider females for these various alternative assignments as opposed to traditional assignments. All of the alternative assignments that have been discussed thus far, with the exception of permanent transfers and virtual work are all shorter in nature and less expensive than the traditional three to five year experience of a long-term expatriate. For this reasons firms may be more willing to take a “risk” on a female candidate.

It is apparent that married and single candidates, male or female, face different obstacles in their pursuit of expatriate assignments and alternative forms of assignment help to overcome some of these boundaries. Research has also found that if firms are concerned about family situations for expatriates then alternative forms of assignment are more likely to be used. Specifically Meyskens proposes that, “more married individuals are selected for alternative assignments than single/divorced individuals” (1997, p. 1447). As the use of alternative assignments continues to rise, it is likely too then, that the number of female expatriates considered for international work will rise with it.

The use of alternatives has the benefit of neutralizing some of the myths and concerns that firms have for using female expatriates. The first myth, that host-country nationals will be prejudicial toward women, has essentially already been disproven. Rather, gender is seen as being incidental as long as the female expatriate is competent and skilled for the role (Adler, 1997). Although this myth does not hold much significance, it is true that females do face greater obstacles in certain social settings in male dominated societies. Professionally they are seen as managers but outside of the office it is sometimes more difficult for this disassociation to take place (Solomon, 1998). By using alternative forms of assignment such as commuter and business travel, females may be less likely to find themselves in these types of situations that may take place on weekends or after-hours. Although many of the concerns surrounding sending females abroad are unwarranted it is true that females have been known to take longer to adjust culturally (Collings, 2006, p. 180). By utilizing commuter and business travel assignments, this transition could be made easier because of the less jarring nature of culture shock if employees are frequently returning to their home country. However, there is a concern associated with regular commuting and business travel in that there is the potential for failure in establishing effective relationships with colleagues and customers. Additionally, work overload that has been known to occur in business traveler assignments (Collings, 2007, p. 206).

Furthermore, thanks to virtual assignments that do not require regular travel at all, females will not face any of the potential constraints that they would in a traditional, short-term, or permanent transfer assignment. While the use of alternative assignments cannot guarantee that women do not face some of these societal pressures, as Solomon suggested, the best way for female expatriates to overcome these barriers is to have a plan in place and to be proactive about the situation (Solomon, 1998).

In regards to the second myth surrounding female expatriates, that females do not want to take on international work because of their family constraints or plans for the future, alternative assignments provide solutions here as well. In the cases of commuter or business travel expatriates, there is no need for the upheaval of one’s family and therefore less disruption to their spouse and children than there would be in a traditional long-term approach. Short-term assignments also fall under this umbrella because for most of these assignments, not all necessarily, spouses and children remain in their home country. Research has also cited that, while this makes things easier for the firm and the transition into the host country, these are not without their difficulties. For commuter and business travel, the stress and health issues of frequent travel are often cited in research and for short-term assignments, evidence suggests that there are the threats of stress or burnout for some assignees (Brewster, 2001). While these shorter assignments have their benefits, specifically for women, there are these potential



drawbacks. Despite the drawbacks, however, failure of alternative international assignments are far less costly than a long-term assignments due to the extreme expenses that go along with failure. In fact long-term assignment failure costs, “can far exceed the cost of failure within a traditional managerial role within the home country” (Dickman, 2001, p. 18). Firms are constantly searching for methods to save resources and the use of alternative portfolio assignments can be a tangible cost saver in the long run for them.

While permanent transfers do not provide a clear solution to the issues females face surrounding adjustment they do provide more stable settings for their spouse to seek out international work and for their kids to adapt to their new cultures. Many female expatriates have praised the advantages for their children given the opportunity to travel and live abroad, a permanent transfer gives them the opportunity to do just that (Solomon, 1998). In terms of virtual work, once again, the upheaval of an employee’s families is not necessary and the disruption of their everyday lives does not occur. For this reason, myths surrounding female expatriation have no bearing here. Virtual work is the best alternative form of assignment if females or firms have concerns about potential issues with moving families abroad. Admittedly the research in the field of alternative expatriate assignments as they pertain to the barriers faced by females is lacking, as well as the potential impact on families (Collings, 2007, p. 210). However by understanding the nature and intricacies of these assignments and the myths that create barriers for female international managers, it is not difficult to determine which type of assignment may be more beneficial for females than others.

Solutions for females seeking expatriate assignment – firms

Recruitment and selection

As I have discussed extensively and research has suggested, one of the largest challenges facing the international talent pool and women seeking international work is recruitment and selection. Firms need to establish more streamlined and effective screening and selection processes in order to select the best candidate. The “glass-ceiling” phenomenon still seen in domestic business today is the reason for the extreme disparity in management between men and women and this is only exacerbated in the international business world (Warner, 2014b). Because of the informal nature that recruitment and selection take place in, accompanied by the lack of female management and upper management, women are at an automatic disadvantage. Without the support of mentors or networks of female managers, women are often overlooked and firms need to correct this.

In fact, females should be desired for international work by firms. International firms are still seen to rely on technical skills and domestic work track records rather than the importance of “soft skills” in international management. Fortunately for multinationals, these skills lie in the untapped pool of female talent at their disposal. These soft skills are often associated with female management styles such as, “the preference for cooperation over competition, an indirect communication style, greater visibility, and enhanced memorability (Taylor & Napier, 1996; Collings, 2007, p. 208). Additionally, firms should begin to utilize, if they have not already, the various forms of portfolio assignments discussed thus far. These alternative assignments are suggested to be less gender-biased than selection for a traditional expatriate assignment and therefore would open up more opportunities for females in international work (Meyskens, 2009, p. 1447). Unfortunately for females, this is not an issue that they can solve on their own or overnight, rather firms across the world as a need to recognize the value and talent that females bring to organizations, specifically in a global context where this talent is needed most.

Pre-departure



Firms that are hesitant to send females overseas can overcome these concerns by employing a number of tactics to increase their chance for success on the assignment. Important in any form of international assignment, cultural training is a key to deterring culture shock. Specifically for women who may face different gender norms or situations than they are used to, firms should include training on the norms, values, and traditions of a host country regarding women, and deriving solutions for the potentially challenging situations that female expatriates may encounter (Feldes, 1993). This goes along with Solomon's advice to women to have a plan and know how they are going to face potentially problematic situations (1998). Multinationals should offer the same type of trainings for spouses and children in the case that they are traveling with the expatriate to ensure assignment success. While these trainings should be offered to men and women expatriates, for females, where there is cause for concern relating to their adjustment and family demands, this is of the utmost importance.

On-assignment

Just as cultural trainings should be offered to both male and female expatriate candidates, so too should various on-assignment practices. Host-country mentors are another way to ensure a smooth transition for an expatriate into their new role and increase the likelihood of success. Evidence suggests that this is especially true for women, "Mentoring relationships, while important for men, may be essential for women" given that the barriers for success may be greater for women in organizations" (Ragins, 1989 as cited in Caligiuri, 1998 p. 401). These types of mentors will help female expatriates to adapt and increase their understanding of foreign business practices as well as expand their business networks and increase their social skills. Another best practice for firms sending managers abroad is to maintain regular contact with the expatriate during the length of the assignment. Not only will this help to ensure that the tasks and goals of the assignment are being completed, but will also help to maintain assignee morale and help with repatriation efforts at the conclusion of the assignment.

What can females do themselves?

While females cannot fix the disparity in female management rates or the flaws in recruiting and selection that firms have overnight, there is still action that they can take on their own to increase their chances for selection and success. Since networking and social interaction are both vital pieces to rising up the management ladder (a struggle that women have been facing) these are two skills that females should focus on (Lovelace, 2010, p. 754). In a study of female managers who have had international experience, former expatriates also suggested that, "they persistently asked for their next career move, rather than waiting to be offered the next move, and they were better than their male counterparts at balancing a number of functions at the same time" (Linehan, 2000). By demonstrating their desire for difficult and challenging work and their success in that work, not only will females be able to break past the glass ceiling that deters them from management rolls, but they will prove that they are prepared for international assignments. Assignments that are characterized as, "more challenging and risky than the domestic environment" (Mikaela, 2011). These suggestions will help female candidates to rise through the corporate ranks and express a determination for difficult and challenging work.

Although females cannot fix the recruitment issues on their own, they can better their chances for selection by expanding their networks and rising to a higher managerial position. In these roles, one that is more likely to be considered for international work. Additionally Lovelace and Chung state that females should focus on their emotional intelligence, specifically their self-awareness and social awareness to ensure success abroad in foreign cultures (2010, p. 755). These two competencies are most associated with professional development and interactive leadership, which Rosener suggests that women should adopt because they are, "particularly suitable to the versatile and dynamic business



environment of today” (1990). These skills will lend themselves greatly to creating success in the international world of business for female expatriates.

Females need to take action outside of the workplace as well in order to ensure success in their international careers. Expatriate candidates need to be more proactive and need to openly discuss the possibilities of these assignments with their spouses, “this reluctance to involve partners earlier may in fact prevent orgs from choosing the most suitable couples, which would reduce the risk of expat failure” (Reuvid, 2010, p. 61). This statement applies to both male and female candidates, however since female expatriates are often seen to have more difficult transitions with their families it is of the utmost importance to them. By actively involving spouses in the decision making process as well as including the children in the discussion, families will better support each other in their endeavors and the transition abroad will be made easier. Although the world of international business is a far way from establishing gender equality in terms of managerial positions and expatriate opportunities, these tactics for firms and assignees, as well as the use of alternative portfolio assignments, can help make great strides towards equality.

Self-initiated expatriates

An emerging trend in the global labor market today that females can also take advantage of is the use of self-initiated assignments. Fundamentally different in nature, self-initiated expatriates are, “professionals and managers who, unsupported by an organization, expatriate to seek work in a host country for an indefinite period, usually over a year” (Collings, 2007). These are different from company-initiated assignments for the obvious reason that the employee is going abroad on their own without the support of an organization. Where this can be beneficial to women is in the developmental skills that they will gain from their time abroad. By taking on a self-initiated assignment, female managers will be seen as proactive and taking charge of their careers. Additionally, expatriate assignments are now being viewed as highly valuable to the employee, not just the organization, “International assignments may be more beneficial from an individual career perspective and in building individual social capital than building organizational capital” (Collings, 2007, p. 204). For women with a desire for international work, building this experience through their own means can be very valuable.

By having a proven track record of international experience, females can increase their value on the external labor market, an area in which qualified expatriate candidates are greatly lacking (Caligiuri, 1998). Although very different in its nature, and carrying its own risks, self-initiated assignments are a great way for females seeking international experience to get into this field and prove themselves in uncharted territories. The success in these types of assignments will increase their organizational value greatly and will help them increase their potential to be selected for expatriate assignments in the future.

Conclusions

In the growing international labor market, a market characterized by a shortage of talent supply, females must be treated equally to men and considered for all types of international management. Females are too valuable of a resource to be overlooked time and again by organizations for international work. The time of the traditional long-term international assignment is on its way out and replacing it, various alternative portfolio assignments can give women greater opportunities to get involved in expatriate work. The traditional assignment has become plagued with recruitment and selection issues, extremely high costs, relatively high rates of failure, and many issues surrounding culture shock and repatriation for both the assignee and their families. What this has led to is the emergence of shorter, alternative assignments, such as the short-term, commuter assignments,



business travelers and virtual work. Although these assignments are not exactly new, with great strides in technology and mobility, they have become more and more widely used and attractive as alternatives to the traditional assignment for organizations in need of expatriates (Morely, 2006).

The disparity in female versus male management is a trend that must be overcome if women are to gain support in the field of expatriation. This arena is rapidly expanding and it is irresponsible of organizations not to use this large supply of talent to their advantage, "In a survey of 154 multinational corporations employing a total of 4.3 million people worldwide, 67% of the companies reported increases in expatriate populations" (Lovelace, 2010). Although the problems stem from organizations because they recruit and select the potential expatriate candidates, females need to help themselves in closing this gap as well.

By being proactive in their careers and seeking out challenging international work, women will put themselves on the radar for future expatriate possibilities. Creating a strong professional network is of the utmost importance due to the informal nature of recruitment and selection strategies. It is crucial that female managers and executives offer their advice and mentoring capabilities to young females yearning to develop their professional skills and seek out international work. The use of self-initiated assignments is an emerging trend in the field that women have at their disposal and should take advantage of. Gaining international experience and developing both their professional and social capital will make females very attractive and valuable candidates for future international assignments. There is no reason that females should only comprise 13% of an expatriate population that is growing rapidly every day (Lomax, 2001). There is a plethora of talent that is being overlooked in an area that is known to have a high need for this talent. By looking to these driven and talented female managers, the expatriate supply issues that so many multinational corporations are currently facing will become a distant memory.



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The Center for International Human Resource Studies is an initiative of the School of Labor and Employment Relations at the Pennsylvania State University (USA), which aims to encourage IHRM scholarly research, and to serve the International HR practitioner community. Through targeted events, our goal is to develop a strong community of academics and practitioners passionate about international HRM, enabling the sharing of ideas to advance knowledge and practice in the field. The activities of the CIHRS are led by a core team of academics in the School of Labor and Employment Relations – Dr Elaine Farndale (Center Director), Dr Sumita Raghuram, Dr Helen Liu, Dr Jean Phillips, and Dr Stan Gully – supported by researchers and a network of CIHRS Fellows who are leading experts in the IHRM field from across the globe. CIHRS Fellows currently include: Ingmar Björkman (Aalto University, Finland), Chris Brewster (Henley Business School, UK), Paula Caligiuri (Northeastern University, USA), Lisbeth Claus (Willamette University, USA), Tony Edwards (Kings College London, UK), and Randall Schuler (Rutgers University, USA).



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