

Sequential Cross-Cultural Training a Blended and Hybrid Training for Expatriates: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: Globalization has led to exponential growth in cross-cultural interaction, resulting to an incremental repository of literature on management of organizational expatriates. For an expatriate, cross-cultural training (CCT) is an important phenomenon. But a sequential CCT will be much more beneficial when it comes to cross cultural adjustment in a host country. This paper attempts to take a systematic review of literature available on CCT and focus on the need of administering a sequential CCT for increasing effectiveness of expatriate adjustment. In order to achieve the proposed objective, a systematic review of literature (from the 1950s to the present day) was carried out. The results show that there are few studies that assess the impact of the types of adjustment to organizational practices, with the cross-cultural training and language training being the most common. These practices have shown a positive effect on performance and adjustment of expatriates. But there is a lack of studies that have adequate indicators to measure the effectiveness of the sequential CCT on expat performance and adjustment.

Keywords: Cross-cultural training, Expatriate, Expatriate training, Pre-departure training, Sequential CCT.

1. Introduction

With globalization the number of expatriates moving abroad for international assignments is not a thing of the past but has become a common place in the present day. As skilled talent moves from their home country to the host country, cross-cultural interaction manifests. These interactions include business trips to foreign countries, overseas assignments, and working with people of different nationalities (Black & Mendenhall, 1990). Research on expatriates and the problems they experience was widespread for many years (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985; Newman et al., 1978); however, it has received new impetus in recent decades due to the globalization of the business world and work environments (Takeuchi, 2010).

There are various dimensions when it comes to understanding CCT. Cultural intelligence, emotional intelligence, cultural competence and cultural adjustment are some of them. But this paper is going to explore only the need of CCT to be given in a continuum rather than breaking it into pre-departure and post-arrival or in-country training.

There is a long debate in the academic literature regarding the degree to which adjustment is a unitary or multi-faceted phenomenon. Lysgaard (1955), Oberg (1960), Ruben and Kealey (1979), Torbiorn (1982) and Tung (1987) consider adjustment to be a unitary phenomenon and focus mainly on an individual's adjustment to the general environment or culture. However, in more recent studies (Mendenhall and Oddou 1985; Black 1988; Black and Gregersen 1991a; Black, Mendenhall and Oddou 1991; McEvoy and Parker 1995), adjustment is seen as a multi-faceted phenomenon with three major dimensions that are addressed and empirically tested: adjustment to the general environment, referring to the general psychological comfort involving aspects such as living conditions, weather or food; adjustment to the work situation, referring to the psychological comfort with culture specific work values and standards; and adjustment to interacting with host nationals, focusing on the comfort with different communication styles in the host setting. Given the multidimensional conceptualization of culture (see, for example, Hofstede 2001) and strong empirical support (Shaffer et al. 1999), this multidimensional conception of adjustment seems logical. Following this multi-faceted approach, it appears that some expatriates may be well adjusted to one dimension but at the same time poorly adjusted to another. For example, they may adapt themselves to their new work situation in a foreign country but feel uncomfortable in interacting with locals.

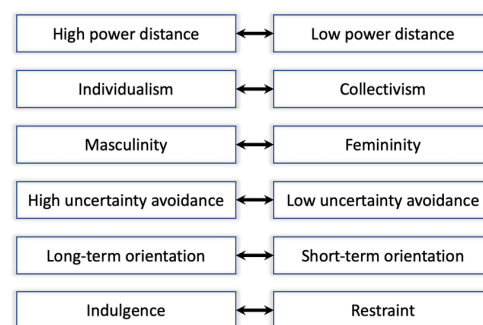


Fig. 1. Hofstede's 6 dimensions of national culture (Source: adapted from Barry Naruta 2019)

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A. Definition and Contents

“Expatriate- refers to any person temporarily working outside of the country for which he or she holds passport on international assignments for “a period exceeding 6 months per Period Cover” (Guo, 2007)”

“Cross Culture Training-Cross-cultural training has generally been defined as any intervention designed to increase the knowledge and skill of people to help them operate effectively in an unfamiliar culture (Kealey & Protheroe, 1996; Brislin, Landis, & Brandt, 1983).”

Broadly speaking, CCT programs focus on the following broad categories (Bean, 2006):

- a) Managing and working with culturally-diverse employees and colleagues;
- b) Working and living internationally;
- c) Designing and delivering products and services to culturally-diverse customers.

CCT is generally administered in three models (Bean, 2006);

- a) General awareness and communication training — focuses on developing generic cross cultural skills and sensitivity to assist with interactions in any culture the participant may encounter.
- b) Ethno- or country-specific training — focuses on a single ethnic group or country to increase participants' knowledge, understanding and ability to function effectively in that environment or with that group.
- c) Training in working with interpreters and translators — focuses on developing the technical skills involved and also includes those elements of cross-cultural communication that influence the process.

According to Lievens, Harris, Keer and Bisqueret (2003, p. 476) two major streams of research have evolved on ways to improve expatriate adjustment. The first has focused on selection methods, the second on cross-cultural training (CCT), which has been identified as a ‘major technique for improving managers’ cross-cultural effectiveness and for reducing failure rates’. Many MNCs now offer CCT to prepare their expatriates for their future host country settings. Pre-departure CCT aims to enhance the adjustment of expatriates by developing individuals’ awareness of differences in appropriate norms and behaviours between their home and their host country (Black and Mendenhall 1990). A distinction between traditional training and CCT can be addressed by the acceptance of differences between cultures, whereas the objective of traditional training can be found in the ‘acquisition of information, rather than on change in attitudes’ (Bhagat and Prien 1996, p. 223). Thus, CCT does not aim at ‘training how to behave’, but aims to enhance the awareness of differences and similarities between cultures to allow faster learning processes.

The early ideas about CCT suggested that it should be carried out before the departure, and some researchers still think that pre-departure training helps the expatriate to form realistic expectations prior to arrival (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2001). Several researchers have, however, suggested the training to be more

efficient when parts of it are held after arrival in the new culture (Grove & Torbiörn, 1985). One reason to concentrate much of the training to the post-arrival phase is the very short time span between selection and departure, in some cases less than a month (Torbiörn, 1976, p.106). Another reason is that it may be difficult to understand, and later recall, abstract social behavior of the host culture if it is learned in a non-authentic environment (Selmer *et al.*, 1998). Consensus as to whether CCT should be held pre-departure or post-arrival has not been reached, and a new model – called sequential training has been introduced.

B. Sequential Training

This type of training has been developed to combine the benefits of both pre-departure and post-arrival training (Littrell *et al.*, 2006). This model is not a method in itself but constitutes a combination of different training methods applied at different times during the training process. It is based on the notion that the capacity for learning varies over time; thus the training methods applied should vary over time as well. Sequential training starts before departure and then progresses in steps through the post-arrival adjustment phases, during which different types of CCT is applied, and can extend all the way to repatriation issues (Selmer *et al.*, 1998). It can start a long or short period before the move and continue for months in the new country (Forster, 2000). Selmer *et al.* (1998) argue that joint sessions for sequential CCT together with other organizations operating in the same foreign culture can lead to synergistic effects; logistical problems will be reduced, and the expatriates can share experiences and learn from each other.

If the time for pre-departure training is limited, didactic training about the cultural adjustment process should be in focus, to get the expatriate to develop realistic expectations about the situation and become aware of the phases that will emerge after the culture shock (Selmer *et al.*, 1998). A fact-based training method may also teach tangible and understandable information about the certain characteristics and behaviors of the new culture that is important to know before, or just after, arrival. This may be delivered either before departure, after arrival in the host country, or both. If a cognitive-behavior modification approach is to be used, it can also be applied either pre-departure, post-arrival, or in both phases (Grove & Torbiörn, 1985). Both attribution training and cultural awareness training are best used before departure, but since attribution training is culture specific it is not applicable in a general training program. The cultural awareness training is very general in nature and can therefore be an effective part of a pre-departure training program that is directed at a group of expatriates that are going to very different regions (Grove & Torbiörn, 1985).

Interactional learning is best used post-arrival, since the expatriate needs an authentic cultural context. Not until then will the expatriate realize many of the challenges he or she will be facing (Grove & Torbiörn, 1985). These personal experiences and realizations about the cultural differences between home country and host country have two positive effects: they can be used effectively in the CCT, and they further motivate the expatriate to participate in the training

(Selmer et al., 1998).

A certain level of language skills is necessary to have directly after arrival in the new country, so that common courtesies and basic greetings are mastered (Forster, 2000; Puck et al., 2008). The amount of language skills needed is not defined, but Puck et al. (2008) state that the person's previous language skills and ability to learn new languages should be taken into account already during the selection process. The better the language skills are, the easier will the adjustment process be, since language has a very strong effect on expatriate adjustment (Puck et al., 2008). The culture shock phase is the stage where the expatriate is the most susceptible to CCT. Both didactic and experiential training can be used, as well as explanations of observed behavior. The latter method is an effective way to develop appropriate behavior and learn how to learn more about the host culture (Grove & Torbiörn, 1985; Selmer et al., 1998). The adjustment phase is characterized by a growing consciousness with the expatriate, who at this stage needs to learn how to behave as the host nationals do. CCT should include on-the-job practice, both structured and unstructured situations, for expatriate-host national interactions (Selmer et al., 1998). Sequential CCT would provide continuous guidance for the incremental restructuring of the expatriate's frame of reference towards greater consistency with the host culture (Selmer, 2010).

Therefore, it is better that training takes place in two stages (pre-departure stage and post-arrival stage) and not be limited to pre-departure training only (Feldman & Bolino, 1999; Mendenhall & Stahl, 2000; Selmer, Torbiörn, & de Leon, 1998; Suutari & Burch, 2001).

Sequential training is based on giving cognitive-focused training in the pre-departure phase, because that prepares an expatriate for culture shock and for the changes in their frame of reference. Behavioural and affective focused training should be given after arriving in the host culture because it would lower an expatriate's ethnocentrism and it would teach them how to deal with encounters of cross-cultural real life issues (Selmer, Torbiörn & Leon, 1998; Littrell, 2006).

Stage 1: Pre-departure training:

This training should majorly focus on the development of cross-cultural interaction skills. Among the specific methods used were role plays, short simulations, culture assimilators, and case studies. Another importance dimension is regarding the rigor of pre-departure training—namely, that one-size-fits-all training may not be as effective as tailoring the training to the specific context of the international assignment (Vance & Paik, 2002). The pre-departure training offered by consulting firms are generally rigorous in nature but contain general content. That is, it rigorously delved into general culture norms. New research is beginning to find that in addition to general cultural norms, pre-departure training should be custom designed around the unique contextual and cultural issues associated with the circumstances the international assignees will face. It is important to get inputs from the expats regarding their expectations, concerns, goals, and needs regarding working with the host country colleagues. That way,

organization could ensure that the pre-departure training would address both general and joint venture-specific cultural issues. In general pre-departure training is necessary to help the engineers and their families start off on a good foot cross-culturally, but additionally they would need more training during their sojourn overseas. Sometimes the host country's business and social cultures like that of Asians are complex and often fundamentally different from U.S. culture. Thus, training needs to be provided to the expats throughout the duration of the project.

Stage 2: Post-arrival training/In-Country Training:

Learning about the new culture is useful before leaving on a global assignment, but truly effective training requires rigorous, in-depth, cross-cultural training after global managers are "in-country" (Feldman & Bolino, 1999; Mendenhall & Stahl, 2000; Selmer, 2001; Selmer et al., 1998). To understand why this is the case, refer to the Figure 2. Before they leave their home country, it is more difficult for expats to imagine what the trainers are trying to explain. For example, it is one thing to imagine what it is like to have a subordinate in Japan say, "Yes, I understand what you want me to do" and then do nothing because in fact, he did not understand. It is another thing to have such an interaction and then learn about the cultural reasons behind it.

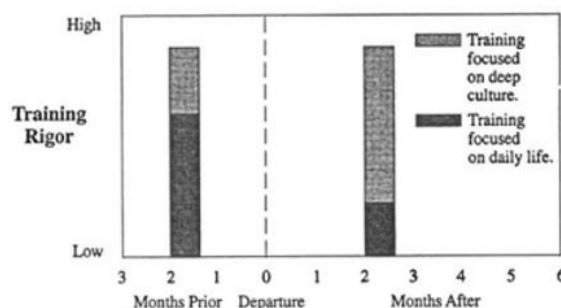


Fig. 2. Source: Adapted from International Assignments (Linda K. Stroh, J. Stewart Black, Mark E. Mendenhall, Hal B. Gregersen, 2005)

In-country training has several advantages:

- Trainees have high motivation levels;
- They have a higher level of baseline experience with the local culture as a foundation for learning deeper cultural values, norms, and ideas;
- Trainees can immediately apply what they learn; and
- The environment itself makes the training content real.

Pre-departure training should focus mostly on basic, day-to-day, survival-level concerns. These are the issues that the assignee and family will have to deal with as soon as they step off the plane. Pre-departure training should also include some of the deeper aspects of the culture but should not attempt to cover every segment at the deepest levels. In addition to the reasons we have already mentioned, without some actual experience in the culture, many managers will simply find it hard to believe that "things could really be that different."

However, the bulk of in-depth culture training should take place after the assignee has been in the country for at least a month but not more than 6 months (see Fig. 2). The reason to wait at least a month is simple. During the first month after arrival, the assignee and family are so involved in all the logistics of getting settled that they have precious little energy or mental capacity to absorb in-depth cultural training. The rationale for not waiting more than about 6 months is equally straightforward. After several months in the country, the assignee and family will begin to form judgments and conclusions about the culture—what the norms are, what motivates people, and so on. Even if they are wrong, changing their minds at that point is difficult at best, impossible at worst. There is no way a traditional training program can cover all the possible permutations of cross-cultural interactions that expats will face. Thus, the key to cross-cultural training is to expand one's view of what a training program should cover. It has been argued that the most effective approach is to retain a local expert who is on call to address expatriates' specific concerns and needs while they are overseas. It is important that they have someone they can talk to one-on-one to help them during the process of cross-cultural adjustment. During the overseas assignment, a coach—someone who is well versed in host country business and social cultures—will be able to better facilitate learning among expatriates than some canned training program. Of course, if the coach perceives that a majority of the expatriates are experiencing similar cross-cultural challenges, he or she could hold a program to address specific issues with the group as a whole. Flexibility is the key to management development during an overseas assignment (Mendenhall & Stahl, 2000).

In another instance a mixed method study conducted by Christos Papademetriou, Michalaki Kyprianou, Peyia, Paphos (International Human Resource Management Sequential Cross-cultural Training – Sociocultural and Psychological Adjustment) supported that sequential CCT has no any significant impact upon the sociocultural and psychological adjustment of the expatriate managers. Despite this result, the qualitative findings showed that CCT has helped the expatriate managers in their sociocultural and psychological adjustment, regardless of whether it was sequential or not. Moreover, the results emphasize the importance of the timing of CCT and not its sequentiality.

2. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to find out, through conducting an integrative literature review, which cross-cultural training methods are the most effective in improving an expatriate's job performance. No study has been able to determine in quantitative terms which cross-cultural training method is the most effective. However, the literature clearly

points out that in-country or post-arrival training in general are more effective when clubbed with pre-departure rather than just conducting pre-departure training. Furthermore, I would like to point out that though sequential training is a more feasible approach, studies are yet to prove the same. This is possibly because most of the companies either offer pre-departure or in-country, rather than a combination of the same. Future research should be carried out to establish the fact that sequential CCT is much more productive as this model seems to have more correlation with the effectiveness of expatriate adjustment and performance though based on the theoretical framework.

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