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Publication Details

This conference paper was originally published as Collier, HW, Jones, RE and McGowan, CB, The impact of family complexity on the attitudes toward an international career of Russian nationals, Proceedings of the Southwestern Academy of International Business Conference, San Diego, 14-17 March 2007 [in press].

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Disciplines

Business | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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The Impact of Family Complexity on the Attitudes toward an International Career of Russian Nationals

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Abstract

This paper examines attitudes of Russian MBA students toward international careers and finds that family complexity impacts responses. Respondents who have complex family situations were slightly favorable toward international careers with average survey response values of about 2.50. The average response values for survey respondents who were not in complex family situations were neutral (3.00) toward an international career. The results of this survey indicate that Russian MBA students are, on average, only slightly favorable toward international careers. The average response values were not different based on gender since the average response value for males was 2.65 and the average response value for females was 2.71. These results contrast with an earlier study that found a stronger preference for international careers among Russian MBA students. Current MBA students in Moscow have more career opportunities than before. The results are based on the responses of twenty-seven Russian students in an AACSB accredited MBA program in Moscow who speak both Russian and English and work for an international company or agency.

Introduction

As globalization increases, the demand for global managers is surpassing the supply of global managers and this imbalance is a limiting factor in corporate global expansion. Multinational corporations today face a shortage of managers with the requisite skills and knowledge base to operate in a competitive global environment [Ettore, 1993]. Although women are making progress in moving up the corporate ladder, the glass ceiling has not disappeared. However, corporate managers have begun to focus on performance and ability rather than gender. The US is the most advanced country in the world with respect to women's rights with the number of

women in the job force increasing steadily over the past fifty years, Marsh (1990). Programs such as the Equal Pay Act, the Equal Opportunity Act, Title IV, and the Civil Rights Act, and affirmative action programs have helped to change attitudes toward women in managerial positions, Maital (1989). Few countries offer the economic opportunities for women that the US does. Nonetheless, Adler (1984) argues that multinational corporations must use women to fill the gap between the supply and demand of international managers.

However, Paik and Vance (2002) suggest that a selection bias against women still exists among US managers. Many women do not even consider international careers because of the effect of stereotyping. A study on attitudes toward international business at the CIBER at the University of Illinois shows that respondents believe that women receive less consideration than men when doing business in other countries and that the perceptions were worse after the MBA program. Moore (2002) reports that most companies assume that women are unwilling to relocate, accept international assignments, regardless of the woman's personal situation.

The failure rate among individuals taking an international assignment is high [Black, 1988; Dowling, 1990; and Dunbar and Ehrlich, 1986] as are the costs associated with these failures [Black, 1988 and Wederspahn, 1992]. Dowling (1990) finds that seven percent of responding firms has recall rates as high as forty percent and only 24% of responding firms had recall rates less than ten percent. Dowling finds that the most likely reasons for failure on an international assignment are family adjustment problems followed by a failure of ability on the part of the manager.

Traditionally, global companies have largely limited the pool of potential candidates for international assignments to men. However, given the shortage of individuals with the skills to operate globally, firms that limit their pool of potential international assignees by systematically excluding part of their workforce from international assignments based on gender are likely eventually to find themselves at a competitive disadvantage. Adler (1984) identifies a number of perceived reasons why women are not given overseas assignments. One perceived reason is that women do not want overseas assignments because women do not want to relocate themselves or their families. Another perceived reason is that women are not effective in overseas assignments because of foreign prejudices toward women. A third perceived reason is that men are more likely to succeed in an overseas assignment and, therefore, are a less risky investment for the multinational corporation.

While many multinational corporations are re-evaluating corporate policies regarding women and international assignments, the number of female expatriates is still under-represented relative to the total number of female domestic managers, Florakowski and Fogel (1999). The “glass ceiling” phenomenon likely explains part of this under-representation. Since international assignments usually involve upper-level positions, Selmer (2001), if women are under-represented at the upper-level of the corporation, then women are not even in the pool of applicants considered for an international assignment. Volkmar and Westbrook (2005) find that attitudes toward female managers in Japan have not changed over the last ten years. Selmer and Leung (2003) find that women on international assignments in Hong Kong were of comparable tenure and experience as men managers but were younger, lower in the corporate hierarchy, and less frequently married than men.

Another possible explanation for the low percentage of women in international assignments is that women may be less motivated to accept an international assignment or pursue an international career. The motivation for women to pursue an international career or assignment is based in large part on perceived opportunities and attractiveness of international opportunities. If women do not perceive an international career or an international assignment as attractive, this will be reflected in the attitudes of women toward an international career and assignment. Wang and Bu (2004) find that Canadian undergraduate business students had a very positive attitude toward a career in international business without regard to gender if the assignment were career enhancing and not in an undesirable place and would not affect family life negatively.

The Motivation to Pursue an International Assignment and Career

Stone (1991) in a survey of Australian, expatriate, and Asian managers reports the main criteria used in expatriate selection. The main criteria used in expatriate selection include the desire to serve overseas, technical competence, the ability to adapt, spouse and family adaptability, and human relations skills. Hodgetts and Luthans (2000) argue that the desire to serve overseas is usually not sufficient motivation for assignment to an overseas post. The individual must also believe in the importance of the job and have a sense of mission. Nevertheless, the desire to accept an overseas assignment and by extension to pursue an overseas career is seen as an important determinant in the selection of individuals for an international assignment. Adler (1987) finds that over eighty percent of international assignments for women began with the woman suggesting the assignment first.

Gender and opportunity for International Assignments and Careers

A study by Adler (1984) found that although men believe that women are qualified for domestic managerial positions, men tend to believe that women are unqualified for international careers. Adler (1993) found that more than half the companies surveyed hesitated to send women abroad. Almost four times as many firms report reluctance in selecting women for international assignments as report hesitance in promoting women to domestic management positions. While females account for 30 percent of students in MBA programs, women only represent 14 percent of candidates chosen for foreign postings [Koretz, 1999]. A study by Catalyst (2000) reports that although 49 percent of middle managers are women, only 13 percent achieve expatriate roles. Other studies estimate the number of female expatriates as even lower [Adler, 1993 and West and Leung, 1994].

One reason often given for the lower percentage of females in international assignments is that women will be at a disadvantage working in a foreign country. Three-quarters of the companies surveyed by Adler (1993) stated that foreigners are so prejudiced against women that women would be unable to succeed even if given a foreign assignment. However, the present Secretary of State of the United States is female and the Secretary of State under the previous administration was a female.

Women within a culture are traditionally given a subordinate position in organizations. However, based on the experience of women executives working abroad, female executives are more likely to be accepted than indigenous women [Adler, 1993]. Expatriate women are more likely to be treated first as professionals, then as cultural representatives, and only lastly as

women. Adler (2002a) reports that foreign managers do not treat expatriate women managers as women but treat them as expatriate managers first. Westwood and Leung (1994) report less gender discrimination overseas than at home.

Another reason given for the lower percentage of females in international assignments is that women are not as interested in pursuing an international career as men. However, Adler (1986, 1993) found that women MBAs expressed just as much interest in pursuing international careers as men MBAs.

Gender stereotyping can also hinder the career of a female expatriate. A woman with the same level of talent and performance as a man is more likely to be under-recognized and under-rewarded, Caligiuri and Cascio (1998). This is particularly true when a firm has considerably more men than women in managerial positions, Klenke (1996). Izraeli, Banai, and Zeira (1980) describe four types of stereotyping that affects negative attitudes toward women managers for international assignments. Sex characteristic stereotyping relates to personality characteristics such as aggressiveness. Sex role stereotyping that relates to gender specific behaviors such as responsibility for child rearing. Sex labeling of occupations relates to gender related jobs such as nurses and engineers. Sex value stereotyping relates to attributing a lower value to the status of women in general.

The internal political climate also plays a part in limiting the careers of females. When managerial positions are disproportionately filled by men, the managerial “club” is dictated by male relationships and male standards of success, Roper (1996). Indirectly and directly, the

corporate climate can play a part in the international careers of females, Caligiuri and Cascio (1998).

Attractiveness of an International Career

Despite increasing globalization and the rising demand for competent international managers, an expatriate faces a unique set of life and career challenges. These challenges are independent of gender. That is, the additional difficulties faced by a manager in a multinational corporation in an overseas assignment, are not dependent on the gender of the expatriate manager.

Managers with families face several additional potential difficulties in overseas assignments. Expatriate managers with spouses and children must overcome these additional problems. Many international assignments which are terminated prematurely are terminated because the spouse or children are unhappy and do not want to remain in the foreign country.

Dual-career couples face their own set of difficulties when one spouse is provided an international assignment opportunity. A significant number of managers reject an overseas assignment opportunity because of the career of their spouse, Harvey and Wiese (1998). As the number of dual-career, couples increases, multinational companies will have to find reasonable solutions to this problem or face a diminished pool of willing and qualified candidates for international assignments.

Repatriation is another difficulty facing an individual who accepts an international assignment. These difficulties increase with the duration of the foreign assignment. A study by Tung (1988) reports three major difficulties with repatriation:

1. The international assignee is not longer a part of the corporation's mainstream. In general, he or she becomes part of the "out of sight, out of mind" group.
2. Organizational changes may have taken place. These changes may have a negative impact on the returning individual position in the company.
3. Technological changes may have a negative impact on the value of the individual's existing skills.

How important are international assignments to an individual's overall career? If the survey of Hambrick and Snow (1989) is representative, the answer is "NOT VERY." The Hambrick and Snow survey of major US firms found that only six percent believed that a foreign assignment is important for an executive's overall career. Forty-nine percent reported that foreign assignments are of no value for the careers of executives.

Because of the career difficulties of repatriated executives coupled with a low valuation of foreign assignments for career enhancements, many companies are likely to experience difficulties in finding candidates willing to undertake international assignments, Black (1991). This could work to the advantage of women, provided women perceive an overseas assignment as an opportunity to advance their careers. A willingness to pursue a path seen by men as less

career enhancing could allow women to gain the experience while operating in a less competitive environment.

Gender and Attitude toward an International Career: Hypothesis

Women understand that in most workplace organizations, women will experience discrimination. If women are working in a domestic environment, the discrimination will come from domestic sources. If women are working abroad, the discrimination and sexism will likely come from expatriate men, not locals, Westwood and Leung (1994).

There is little to suggest, either conceptually or empirically, that it is the international dimension which is a primary causal factor affecting any gender differences in motivation. The work culture tends to favor the dominant gender Klende, (1996). When women are in the minority in a work group, their performance evaluations tend to be lower than when they are in the majority, Sackett, DuBois, and Wiggins-Noe (1991). Domestic workplace dissatisfaction could make an international assignment and career appear more attractive. However, as Hodgetts and Luthans (2000: 436) warn: “Applicants who are unhappy with their current situation at home and are looking to get away seldom make effective overseas managers.”

Borstorff and her associates (1997) identify a number of factors associated with employee willingness to work overseas. None of these factors included gender. Instead such factors as marital status, children, career commitment, and support of spouse and organization were identified as important determinants of the willingness to work overseas.

Adler (1986, 1993) addresses the gender issue directly. Adler finds that female MBAs are just as interested in overseas careers as male MBAs. However, both Harris and Harris (1988) and Harvey and Wiese (1998) find that a working spouse can make the international assignment more difficult. Adler (2002b) finds that some dual couples find overseas assignments to be easier. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the impact of a more complex family situation on attitudes toward an international career or an international assignment. The sample is a group of Russian MBA students attending an AACSB accredited program given in Moscow, Russia.

Hypothesis: There will not be differences in attitudes toward an international career for single survey respondents versus survey respondents with complex family situations, that is, respondents who are married, have working spouses and/or have children.

Survey Sample and Results

Our study survey is based on the work reported in Adler (1984). The survey respondents are students in an AACSB accredited MBA program in Moscow that is jointly sponsored by the California State University at East Bay and the Institute of Business and Economics at the National Academy of Economics. The MBA program is a full-time, two-year program where most of the students have full-time jobs for either a multinational company or a government or international agency. The first year of the program is designed to provide students with the basic skills needed for the advance, thirty hour MBA program. The students are all fluent in English, which is the language of instruction for the program.

The students were asked to respond to the statement “I am seriously considering pursuing an international career”. The students were offered five possible responses where one indicates that the statement is “very true” and five indicates that the statement is “definitely not” true. A response of three indicates that the student is “neutral” toward the statement. The other two optional responses were “somewhat true” and “probably not” true. Twenty respondents were male and seven respondents were female. The average response for the males was 2.65 or slightly favorable toward an international career and the average response for the females was 2.71 also slightly favorable toward an international career.

Fifteen of the respondents were married and twelve of the respondents were not married. The average response level for the married respondents was 2.40 indicating that married respondents were slightly favorable toward international careers. The average response level of the non-married respondents was 3.00 indicating a neutral attitude toward international careers.

Twelve of the respondents have children and fifteen of the respondents do not have children. The average response level for the respondents with children was 2.50 indicating that respondents with children were slightly favorable toward international careers. The average response level of the respondents with no children was 2.80 indicating a more favorable attitude toward international careers.

Eleven of the respondents have spouses with careers and two of the respondents have spouses who do not have careers. The average response level for the respondents with spouses who have careers was 2.45 indicating that respondents with spouses with careers slightly favorable toward

international careers. The average response level of the respondents with spouses who do not have careers was 2.00 indicating a more favorable attitude toward international careers.

Seventeen survey respondents have a spouse or children. The average response value for this group is 2.53 indicating a slightly favorable attitude toward an international career. Ten survey respondents do not have a spouse or children the average response value for this group is 2.90 indicating a neutral attitude toward an international career.

Discussion of Survey Results

The responses of students to this survey indicate a slightly favorable attitude of Russian MBA students toward international careers. Respondents who have complex family situations were slightly favorable toward international careers with average survey response values of about 2.50. The average response values for survey respondents who were not in complex family situations were neutral (3.00) toward an international career. The results of this survey indicate that Russian MBA students are, on average, slightly favorable toward international careers. The average response values were not different based on gender since the average response value for males was 2.65 and the average response value for females was 2.71. These results are consistent with Collier, Jones, and McGowan (2006) that indicated that gender is not an issue when measuring the attitude of Russian MBA students toward an international career. However, marital status (children or spouse) is an issue. However, in the earlier study, married respondents were less likely to favor an international career than the respondents in the current study. These results contrast with an earlier study by Hietapelto, McGowan, and Moeller (2002) that indicated a stronger preference for international careers among Russian MBA students.

The more recent survey respondents are less favorable toward international careers than earlier survey respondents because career opportunities in Moscow have increased dramatically. Current MBA students in Moscow have more career opportunities in Moscow now than did MBA students ten years ago. However, survey respondents with a more complex marital situation are more likely to favor an international career, as did the survey respondents in Hietapelto, McGowan, and Moeller (2002).

Literature over the last thirty years indicates that the success of an overseas assignment on the part corporate managers is more dependent on the adjustment of the family than the employee. Surveys show that a complex family situation (spouse, children, or working spouse) makes the adjustment to an international assignment more difficult. Managers is overseas assignments are more likely to fail because of family problems than because of failure on the part of the employee. Hunt (1997) provides a five phase model for the overseas assignment and repatriation process. Success in an overseas assignment requires corporate pre-planning for the overseas assignment that involves both the employee and the entire family planning and reentry planning. Companies that ignore the complexities of the international assignment loop are missing opportunities since many employees are in complex family situations.

Table 1
 Attitudes toward International Careers
 2006

Male	2.65	20
Female	2.71	7
Total	2.67	27

Married	2.40	15
Single	3.00	12

Children	2.50	12
No Children	2.80	15

Career Spouse	2.45	11
No Career Spouse	2.00	2

Spouse & Children	2.53	17
No	2.90	10

I am seriously considering pursuing an international career.

1	very true
2	somewhat true
3	neutral
4	probably not
5	definitely not

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