

Influence of Personality and Gender on Expatriate Successful Assignment in the Nigerian Oil and Gas Industry

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Abstract

Expatriates continue to be a means of knowledge transfer as they facilitate in improving the performance of overseas subsidiaries through the distribution of their personal experience and individual knowledge in overseas subsidiaries where such knowledge is lacking (Fang, et al., 2010). This is because the use of expatriates in managing and monitoring of foreign operations of MNC's has proven to be successful and consequently can have an unswerving effect on the successful functioning and/or productivity of an MNC (Fang et al, 2010).The study peruses previously theorized, yet unmeasured variables such as personality traits, and gender on expatriate successful assignment, focusing on the Nigerian Oil and gas industry. This study seeks to delineate the relative importance of these factors in enhancing each facet of expatriate successful assignment thereby offering a framework to guide future research and practice.

Introduction

Expatriation appears to be the one major means used by multinational corporations to transfer knowledge and manage their international assignments (Fang et al., 2010; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Hocking et al., 2004). However, much has been written on the soaring level of failed international assignments in relation to expatriates' failure, for the most part, as it concerns the oil and gas industry. In support to this Downes and Thomas (2000) assert that early returns of expatriates from overseas assignments pose a major difficulty for MNCs as this occur in 25% to 40% of every overseas assignment.

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The rationale for this research was necessitated by the need to critically review how multinational corporations can manage their expatriate employees on international assignments in order to ensure the success of their internationalization objectives by considering the influence of personality and gender. This research is imperative at this time owing to the argument mostly concerned with the issues of expatriate culture shock and personality traits, and adaptation problems of female expatriates (Takeuchi, et al., 2005). This study would seek to provide more current information and findings on the factors influencing expatriate successful assignment completion. It will consider UK expatriates working in Nigeria, and will try to evaluate the performance/ personality (Takeuchi, et al., 2005; Fang et al., 2010; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Hocking et al., 2004; Black et al, 2009; Tsai and Eisingerich, 2010) characteristics that could lead to successful completion of expatriate assignment or otherwise.

Literature Review

Dickmann, Brewster and Sparrow (2008) identified the important criteria for selecting expatriates for foreign assignments, asserting that the selection process should seek expatriates with wide-ranging knowledge and understanding of diverse cultural values, ability to work and socialise with other people, enduring and farsighted personality, outstanding skills and educational qualifications. In addition the individual should possess good health, be inspired, resourceful and be able to work with a team-oriented spirit (Dickmann, Brewster and Sparrow, 2008).

Gender is another aspect briefly identified in this study, but is focusing on female expatriates. The attempt to find explanations for why so few women hold international positions. Adler, 1984a and Adler, 1984b identified three myths in the academic literature and among practitioners: (1) women do not want to be international managers; (2) companies refuse to send women abroad; and (3) foreigners' prejudice against women renders them ineffective. When testing these three myths empirically, (Adler, 1984b and Adler, 1994) found that only the second was grounded. Adler's work profoundly influenced the literature on female expatriates over the last two decades, directing research towards the investigation of the structural barriers that female expatriates face (e.g., Harris, 1995; Linehan & Walsh, 1999; Mayrhofer & Scullion, 2002; Stroh, Varma, & Valy-Durbin, 2000).

Adler's (1984b) first myth on female expatriates expresses the idea that women have been socialised into a female gender role and that they therefore are not interested in an international assignment. This myth was exposed by the results of Adler, 1984b and Adler, 1994, finding no differences in willingness to relocate between male and female MBA students. Nonetheless, several studies have continued to indicate that the main barrier to women's presence in international positions is their own gender identity. They have been investigated on women's lack of interest in these positions (Linehan & Walsh, 1999), their unwillingness to relocate and to move their family (Lowe, Downes, & Kroeck, 1999), and the influence of dual careers and children on women's decision to accept international assignments (Stroh et al., 2000).

The second myth on female expatriates indicates that managers are reluctant to send women abroad (Adler, 1984b). Adler's (1984a, 1994) empirical findings supported this myth as managers consider an international assignment by a woman to be a high risk-operation. They perceive the problem either in the women themselves or in the surrounding context. In any case, managers use arguments such as physical safety, hazards involved in travelling in developing countries, isolation and loneliness, possible negative reactions of superiors, subordinates, clients and colleagues towards women in managerial positions as reasons for likely failure rates among female expatriates (Adler 1994)

The third myth asserts that women will not be effective in other cultural environments because foreign managers have culture-bound prejudices against female managers. The argument is that female expatriates cannot be successful internationally because, in other cultures, women do not have equal status with men especially in a country like Nigeria. The women-unfriendly environment in the host country will thus render female expatriates ineffective.

The other aspect of this paper is **personality traits**, extensive research has found that well-adjusted and high-performing international assignees tend to share certain personality traits (Black, 1990, Caligiuri, 2000a, Caligiuri, 2000b, Church, 1982, Dalton and Wilson, 2000, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985) and some specific personality characteristics were shown to enable international assignees, which are;

- 1) To be open and receptive to learning the norms of new cultures
- 2) To initiate contact with host nationals
- 3) To gather cultural information, and

- 4) To handle the higher amounts of stress associated with the ambiguity of their new environments (Black, 1990, Church, 1982, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985 and Shaffer et al., 2006) which are all important for international assignee success.

A meta-analysis examining personality as predictors of expatriate performance found that extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were predictive of successful expatriate performance (Mol et al., 2005). Within the general research literature on personality, five factors have been identified as a useful typology or taxonomy for classifying the multitude of personality characteristics (Digman, 1990, Goldberg, 1992, Goldberg, 1993, McCrae and Costa, 1987, McCrae and Costa, 1989 and McCrae and John, 1992). Labelled "**the Big Five**" this set of personality factors include: (1) extroversion (2) agreeableness, (3) conscientiousness, (4) emotional stability, and (5) openness or intellect. These integrate with many of the characteristics consistently associated with expatriate success and more broadly success in many jobs performed in home countries and while working in other cultures.

Each of the Big Five personality characteristics relate to international assignee success in a unique way (Caligiuri, 2000a, Caligiuri, 2000b, Ones and Viswesvaran, 1997, Ones and Viswesvaran, 1999 and Shaffer et al., 2006) and should be included in a selection system for international assignees for different reasons (Van Vianen, De Pater, & Caligiuri, 2005). For example, employees higher in *conscientiousness* are more likely to become leaders, gain status in the eyes of others, get promoted, and earn higher salaries, all clear indicators of successful adaptation and performance. Studies in a domestic context have found a positive relationship between conscientiousness and work performance among UK professionals in other countries (e.g., Barrick and Mount, 1991 and Day and Silverman, 1989).

More broadly, the Big Five have been repeatedly shown to be related to many outcomes of critical importance to organisations. Mount and Barrick (1995) linked personality variables to work motivation drawing interesting distinctions between cognitive abilities (what someone "can do") versus personality (what someone "will do") and citing both to be important in the prediction of performance. Hough (1992) and Stewart (1999) demonstrated that an aspect of conscientiousness, dependability, is related to attendance. These and other findings have been used to justify personality assessment as an important indicator of job performance. Further, Borman, White, Pulakos and Oppler (1991) as well as Murphy (1996) support the importance of using personality above and beyond ability in predicting performance.

From the perspective of motivation being a precursor to successful performance, Judge and Ilies (2002) in their meta-analysis show strong support for the links between personality variables and motivation. In this sense there is ample evidence that measuring personality can help to identify the most motivated individuals and therefore help select individuals with higher probability of success on the job. Finally, in the context of predicting leadership, Hogan, Curphy and Hogan (1994) and Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt (2002) have demonstrated consistent relationships between the Big Five personality dimensions and leader effectiveness. All of these findings have led to a resurgence of interest in personality as a predictor of performance and inclusion of personality in selection models for all types of employees from senior executives (Thornton, Hollenbeck & Johnson, 2009) to public safety personnel (Cascio, Jacobs and Silva, 2009).

Personality characteristics related to relational skills (extroversion and agreeableness) enable international assignees to form stronger interpersonal bonds with host nationals, other international assignees, and those outside the workplace (customers and clients), all of which are critical to job success. Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al.'s (2005) meta-analysis found a positive relationship between relational skills and cross-cultural adjustment. Extroverted individuals are able to more effectively learn the social culture of the host country through their relationships with local nationals and, in turn, report higher cross-cultural adjustment (Abe and Wiseman, 1983, Black, 1990, Caligiuri, 2000a, Caligiuri, 2000b, Dinges, 1983, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1988 and Searle and Ward, 1990). More agreeable international assignees tend to deal with conflict collaboratively, strive for mutual understanding, and are less competitive. They report greater success on the assignment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005, Caligiuri, 2000a, Caligiuri, 2000b, Mol et al., 2005, Ones and Viswesvaran, 1997, Black, 1990 and Tung, 1981). Emotional stability is also important for success as an international assignee. Emotional stability is an assessment of the universal adaptive mechanism enabling humans to cope with stress in their environment (Buss, 1991). Given that stress is often associated with living and working in a new and or an ambiguous and unfamiliar environment (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005), emotional stability is an important personality characteristic for international assignees' adjustment to the host country (Abe and Wiseman, 1983, Black, 1988, Gudykunst, 1988, Gudykunst and Hammer, 1984 and Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985) and completion of an international assignment (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997).

Mol et al.'s (2005) meta-analysis reported that the estimated true population effect size for the relationship between emotional stability and international assignee success is positive (p.10).

Seeming to be the most intuitively necessary personality characteristic relating to international assignee success is openness. For an international assignee, the ability to correctly assess the social environment is more complicated given that the host country may provide ambiguous social cues or very little in the way of insight into cultural expectations (Caligiuri & Day, 2000).

Successful international assignees must possess cognitive complexity, openness, and intuition to accurately perceive and interpret the host culture (Caligiuri et al., 2000, Dinges, 1983, Finney and Von Glinow, 1988 and Ones and Viswesvaran, 1997). Openness should be related to international assignee success because individuals higher in this personality characteristic will have fewer rigid views of appropriate and inappropriate contextual behaviour and are more likely to be accepting of the new culture (e.g., Abe and Wiseman, 1983, Black, 1990, Cui and Van den Berg, 1991 and Hammer et al., 1978). Collectively, these personality characteristics have substantial empirical support and should be included in selection systems designed to forecast success in international assignments (Van Vianen et al., 2005). It is important to note that this type of employee assessment would predict those who will do well in adjusting to a cross-cultural job context. This assessment does not, however, predict success in the actual job tasks. This is where we see a departure from traditional selection situations and move to a more sequential process. In many ways this is more similar to a person–environment fit approach (French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982) where we are now trying to sort from a group of individuals whom we have already identified as capable of doing the job and are attempting to identify among the capable ones, the few who are best suited for the job considering other characteristics beyond simply task performance. This work has broadened to include person–job fit and person–organisation fit and has been shown to be a valuable approach to selection in the work of (Cable and Judge, 1996 and Cable and Judge, 1997)

In this sense successful international assignment can be seen as a multi-stage process with perhaps the most critical stage being the one that relies most heavily on looking beyond how well someone can do technically to how well the person will fit with the culture which leads to the research questions

H₁: Gender and personality traits play a great role in successful performance of expatriate assignment.

H₂: Personality traits influence expatriate performance on assignment.

H₃: Gender is a basis for selection of international assignees.

Methodology

The scope and nature of this research entailed the collection of data about the thoughts and views of expatriates (employees) of Subsea 7 Nigeria, in order to determine if, and how personality and gender may affect their ability to produce results.

Survey strategy provided the researcher with the opportunity of conducting an independent investigation of a sample population thereby standing free from human interest (Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler, 2006). The choice of this method is influenced by the fact that it entails the collection of data from a relatively number of expatriates (Jankowicz, 2005), and is versatile, more efficient and economical. This method provides the researcher with the option of asking a few well- structured questions administered through an online survey questionnaire to a simple random sample of expatriates within the survey organisations (Jobber, 2010)

Furthermore, the questionnaire method as used in this research ensures that any researcher's bias is minimised during the data gathering and analysis phases (Jobber, 2010). This method is adopted because it enables the researcher to collect measurable data/information from the respondents and numerically process it using statistical tools (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). The adoption of this method is also influenced by the need to gather convincing numerical evidence used in testing the research hypothesis (or research questions) in order to prove a relationship between the findings of this research and the assumptions raised in the research questions (Sekaran, 2003). Lending credence to the assertion of Jobber (2010), the adoption of questionnaires in the research ensured objectivity of the data collected and the reduction of human mistakes. It also ensured standardisation of the data gathering process in a quick and easy format owing to time constraints (Jobber, 2010).

Employees selected to participate in the survey were expatriates currently on expatriation in Nigeria and expatriates who have served in this capacity in other geographical regions within the past five years but are presently expatriated in Nigeria. The sample size for this research, was 100(hundred) expatriates. In order to select a sample size that would be representative and give expatriates equal opportunity to be selected; the number 100(hundred) was chosen owing that it is a specialist group and not a major sect of the organization which was spaced in two locations; Lagos, and Port-Harcourt. Consideration was also given to female expatriates in order to obtain a sample size that is gender representative. The confidentiality of the respondents was guaranteed and this was communicated to them in the covering letter attached to the questionnaires. Again bias and discrimination were minimised by ensuring equal opportunities (Anderson, 2004) for all respondents, the questions were structured in a way that did not lead the respondents to a particular position that would present any ethical concerns. The questionnaires were also structured in a way which ensures that the respondents remained anonymous.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

A total of hundred (100) questionnaires were distributed to the expatriate staff of company (Subsea 7), this little number was chosen because it's a specialist group. Of the 100 questionnaires issued, seventy-two (72) responses were received from the expatriates giving a total response rate of 72%, which could be seen as a good rate considering the time and location challenges.

Job Designation

The survey showed that 35 persons were at Manager Level, 12 persons at Senior Manager Levels, 18 persons were Directors and they filled the open box "other" as Director and 7 were Team Leads.

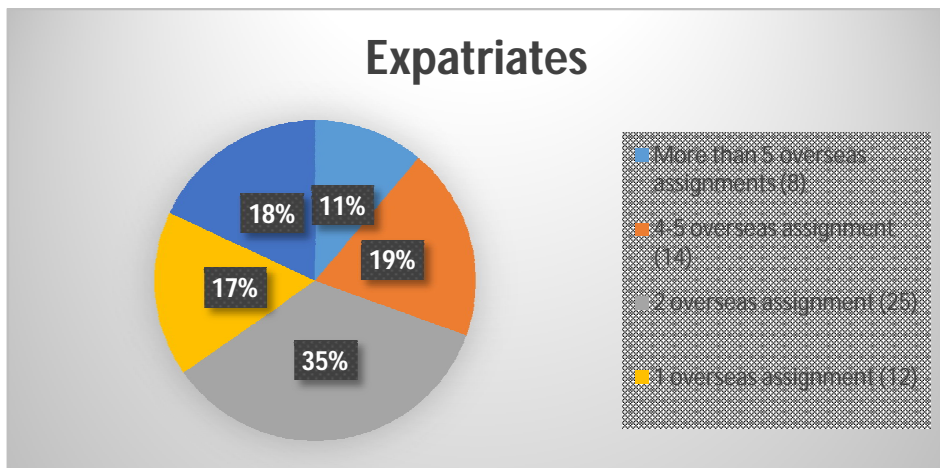
Table 1

Position	Frequency	Valid %	Cumulative %
Director	18	25	25
Senior Manager	12	16.67	41.67
Manager	35	48.61	90.28
Team Leads	7	9.72	100
Total	72	100	

Number of Assignments

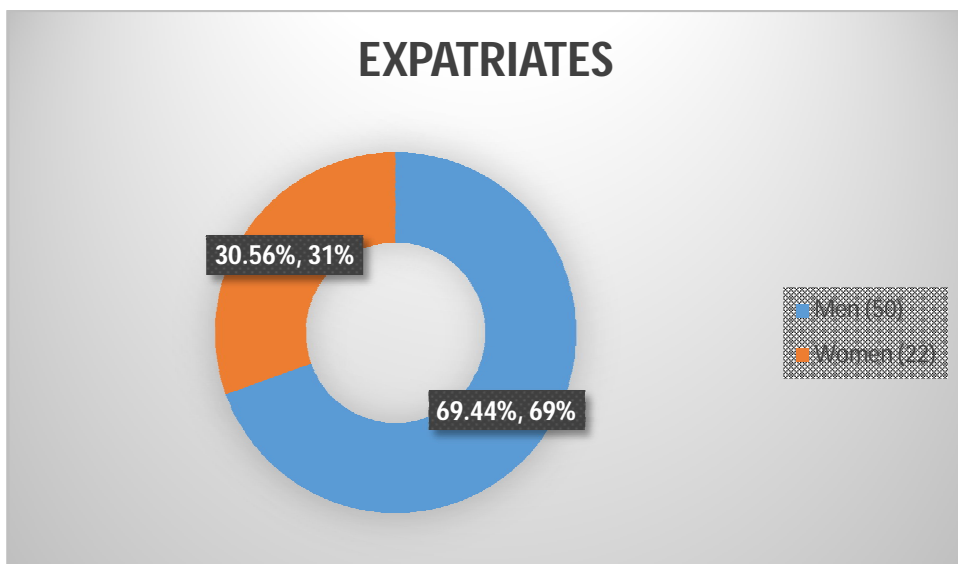
In number of assignments, 8 expatriates had been on 5 overseas assignments, 14 expatriates had been on 4-5 assignments, 25 had been on 2 and 12 had been on 1 whilst the rest were on their very first assignment.

Figure 1



Gender;

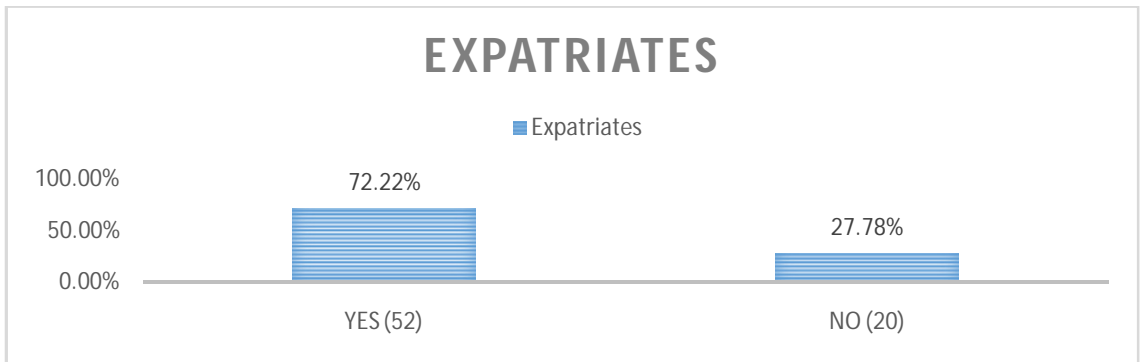
Figure 2



Seventy-Two expatriates sampled in this survey consisted of 50 males at a percentage of 69% and 22 females at a percentage of 31%, thereby contradicting Adler(1984) assertion's that women do not want to be international managers; (2) companies refuse to send women abroad; and (3) foreigners' prejudice against women renders them ineffective. It gives validation to Westwood & Leung 1994, who stated that there is no gender discrimination in expatriation and women participation in expatriation is on the increase.

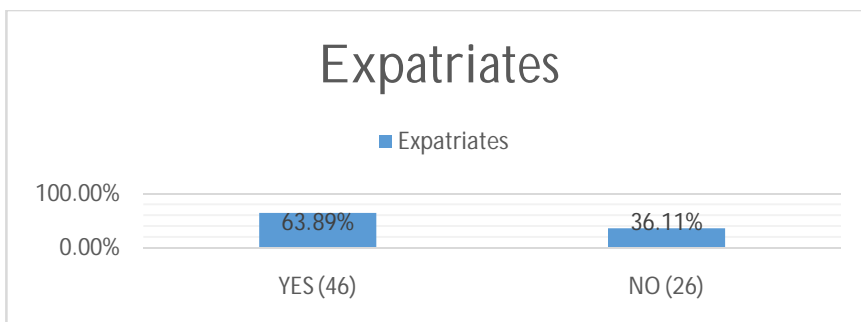
Do you believe your Personality has Contributed to your Adaptation and Success on the Assignment?

Figure 3



52 respondents answered YES and 20 respondents answered no to the question if their personality influenced their ability to adapt on expatriate assignment and to achieve success at it, with majority agreeing that personality influences expatriate assignment.

Gender Plays a Role on Previous or Present Assignments?



Open ended questions were asked in order to give the respondents the opportunity to provide answers to areas of the research questions on personality and performance and gender and performance, because the yes or no questions didn't not really explain in what way they felt their gender influenced their performance or adaptation or played a role in their assignments. Seventy-Two (72) participants responded to these questions giving interesting opinions. These questions were analysed using content analysis.

What role do you think your gender and personality have played in your present assignment? Have these changed in comparison with previous assignments?

The responses assist with answers to research question on the role of personality, and gender on expatriate successful assignment and drives home the aim of the research to disseminate this useful guides obtained from this study.

Below are some responses from the international assignees;

- "Most persons tend to challenge me because i am a woman."
- "My open personality paved way for me to learn new things."
- "Gender is not relevant. Personality is critical because unhappy expats will not perform well."
- "The fact that I am a lady I think there is a perception I'd soon give up and run back to my family, I miss my husband and it's sometimes hard being away for a while."

A majority of respondents thought that their personality has helped them in their assignments, and gender, especially as a woman made work life more difficult or gave the perception of being weak or more attached to their families making their assignments more challenging.

A minority of respondents didn't feel that their gender, personality or family issues changed anything or influenced anything and it was their career and hence they were willing to face it squarely. These answers by respondents gave insights to the validity of assertions of (Black, 1990, Church, 1982, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985 and Shaffer et al., 2006) above and consistent, finding it to be true and functional in this study and a reliable criterion for selection to the Nigerian oil industry.

The third research question which focused on determining if gender was a criterion in expatriate selection, training and placement. Gender, especially for the women made work life more difficult or gave the perception of being weak or more attached to their families making their assignments more challenging. Answers from respondents, in the survey, seeking to find answers to research question two such as; *"Most persons tend to challenge me because i am a woman."* *"The fact that I am a lady I think there is a perception I'd soon give up and run back to my family, I miss my husband and it's sometimes hard being away for a while"* indicates that the main barrier to women's presence in international positions could be their own gender identity. As it is harder to relocate and to move their family (Lowe, Downes, & Kroeck, 1999), and the influence of their expatriate career on their immediate family such as children (Stroh et al., 2000) and Adler 1994's third myth assertion that women will not be effective in other cultural environments because host country nationals have culture-bound prejudices against female managers. The argument is that female expatriates cannot be successful internationally because, in places like Nigeria women do not have equal status with men. The women-unfriendly environment in the host country will thus render female expatriates ineffective. Although this argument is often used by managers as the main reason for not sending a woman on an international assignment, and there has been debates if it is founded or not, this study proves it to be partly true that there is a women unfriendly environment but it does not make the female expatriates ineffective it just gives them a challenging work environment.

Conclusion

This study has been able to review some relevant literature central to this domain. It has also discussed the research design and methodology adopted in obtaining and analyzing primary data for this research. Having analyzed, presented, interpreted, critically discussed and synthesized the findings from the survey with findings from the literature, it was therefore imperative to draw logical conclusions and make recommendations. Research and responses indicates that individual characteristics should be taken into account in expatriate selection to reduce problems associated with poor cross-cultural adjustment such as suboptimal performance, damaged relationships with local employees, suppliers, and customers, and premature return (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). Personality traits can provide a foundation on which expatriates develop the needed international skills and become a more valuable asset to their corporation (being that majority of respondents are in their first assignment).

For example, through an overseas assignment, an expatriate can become more sensitive to the challenges of working in foreign countries. Despite the positive impact of cultural understanding on cross-cultural adjustment, expatriates still need to have the right personality skills to be effective in foreign countries.

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