



Facilitating expatriate adjustment: The role of advice-seeking from host country nationals



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ABSTRACT

The expatriation literature consistently suggests that expatriates on assignment require a great deal of support to adjust to their new environment. This study examines the potential of host country national (HCN) coworkers as an important yet often overlooked source of support for expatriates. Analysis of survey data collected from 350 expatriates working in the U.S. indicated that expatriates who sought advice from HCN coworkers reported higher levels of work and interaction adjustment. This study also found that expatriates were more likely to seek advice from HCN coworkers they perceived as being credible and likable. Implications for research and managerial relevance are offered.

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Despite the fallout of the recent global recession, organizations continue to send expatriates on various assignments (Brookfield, 2013, 2012). However, expatriate assignment failures are costly. A failed expatriate assignment (i.e., premature return of expatriates to their home country) can be costly (Tungli & Peiperl, 2009), disrupt projects, bruise relations with the host country, and tarnish the image of the company. Therefore, it is not surprising that a great deal of research has focused on identifying factors that affect expatriate adjustment (for reviews, see Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar, 2004). This research, however, has tended to focus more on the importance of expatriate intrapersonal factors (e.g., personality traits, Caligiuri, 2000a, 2000b; Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006, and cross-cultural motivation of expatriates, Chen, Kirkman, Kim, Farh, & Tangirala, 2010) and less on understanding how other resources within the expatriate social network impact expatriate adjustment (Harrison et al., 2004).

A growing body of literature has identified relatively dissimilar or distant others, such as host country nationals (HCNs), as a potentially valuable resource for expatriates trying to learn the ropes of their new roles, the host organization, and the host country (Adelman, 1988; Toh & DeNisi, 2007; Vance, Vaiman, & Anderson, 2009). Among earlier studies on expatriate adjustment, Black and his colleagues argued that building relations with HCNs

and maintaining contact with HCNs is a significant predictor of expatriate adjustment (Black, 1990, 1988; Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Caligiuri, 2000a; Gregersen & Black, 1992). Knowledge gained from HCNs may help expatriates manage the experience of culture shock, deal with the demands of their assignments, and socially integrate with the host society (Takeuchi, 2010; Toh, DeNisi, & Leonardelli, 2012; Vance et al., 2009; Varma, Budhwar, & Pichler, 2009). This body of literature suggests that the advice HCN coworkers could give to expatriates – in the form of work-related information and feedback – has the potential to aid expatriate adjustment. Consequently, there has been increasing interest in elucidating the factors that affect HCNs' willingness to provide expatriates with knowledge and support (e.g., Leonardelli & Toh, 2011).

Nevertheless, the willingness of HCNs to give advice should be effective only to the extent expatriates are willing to seek out the advice of HCNs and, subsequently, apply the advice sought. Notably, some research finds that imposed support, such as advice, tends to elicit negative reactions and rejection (Deelstra et al., 2003). Advice that is sought is more likely to be accepted and applied by the seeker than advice that is imposed upon. Even if HCNs are willing to give advice, expatriates may not necessarily view this as valuable or take heed, particularly when the advice was imposed upon them rather than sought. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to understand when expatriates are willing to seek advice from HCN coworkers and whether such advice-seeking facilitates expatriate adjustment. In this study, we examined two key attributes about HCN coworkers that expatriates use to determine whether or not to seek advice from HCN coworkers – namely credibility and liking. We further examined how the advice

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sought from the HCN coworkers differentially affects the dimensions of expatriate adjustment.

This study contributes to the expatriate management literature in at least four important ways. First, this study seeks to understand how expatriate perceptions of the context, particularly assessments of their HCN coworkers, affect expatriates' decision to seek advice from HCNs. Advice-seeking, though potentially beneficial, also has perceived costs to individuals (Lee, 1997). As such, individuals are more likely to seek advice from someone when the perceived benefits outweigh the costs (Nadler, 1991). Accordingly, the perceptions expatriates form about their HCN coworkers should determine whether HCN coworkers would be sought after for advice. This study aims to identify these perceptions and explain the mechanism by which such perceptions affect expatriate adjustment.

Second, this study takes the view that expatriates, like other organizational newcomers, can be proactive in their adjustment by seeking advice from HCNs (Feldman & Thomas, 1992). This proactive role in the expatriate adjustment process has been relatively overlooked in the literature. To date, much of the expatriate management literature has focused on human resource practices that support the expatriate and the expatriate characteristics that best predict success. Drawing on proactive socialization literature, this study identifies advice-seeking as a potentially useful strategy for expatriates and contends that seeking advice for dealing with specific problems is more useful for expatriate adjustment than receiving copious amounts of unsolicited advice. Compared to unsolicited advice, advice that is sought is more likely to be accepted and in turn be more beneficial for adjustment.

Third, understanding how expatriates interact with HCNs, particularly to gain advice from them, continues to be an area that is under-researched (Takeuchi, 2010). With a few exceptions (e.g., Olsen & Martins, 2009), research examining both the factors that explain the likelihood of expatriates seeking advice from HCNs and the association of this behavior with expatriate adjustment is relatively scarce. Existing research has also tended to focus on more immutable characteristics, such as expatriate demographics (Olsen & Martins, 2009) and cultural similarity (Farh, Bartol, Shapiro, & Shin, 2010). The more proximal predictors of advice-seeking (in particular, the perceptions expatriates hold of their HCN colleagues) may yield additional insight into the decision of expatriates to seek advice and from whom to seek this advice in order to improve their chances of adjustment (Farh et al., 2010). Furthermore, traversing cultural boundaries to seek out advice from HCNs can be more complex and difficult when compared to seeking out advice from similar others (Toh et al., 2012). Though expatriates have a potentially wider network of advice sources beyond HCN coworkers, and while these HCN coworkers may not always be the most important source at all times (Farh et al., 2010), this study contributes to the literature by examining an under-researched yet important social interaction – the one between expatriates and their HCN coworkers.

Finally, this study examines the experience of expatriates working in the U.S. – a country not typically viewed as a host country despite its significance as one, and not studied as such. The literature has tended to view other countries outside of the U.S. as overseas, when in fact the U.S. is a major recipient of expatriates (Brookfield, 2013). Reports published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development show the U.S. to be the largest recipient of inbound foreign direct investment of any economy in the world (UNCTAD, 2012) – an important destination for large number of businesses from other parts of the world. However, in the past five years, the U.S. has been ranked by expatriates as among the top five most difficult assignment countries, and has been in the top four for countries with the highest number of expatriate failure rates (Brookfield, 2013, 2012,

2011, 2010, 2009). Thus, understanding how expatriates adjust to assignments in the U.S. is imperative.

In this study, we look at Indian expatriates working in the U.S. and investigate how their advice-seeking from HCNs (i.e., American coworkers) facilitates their adjustment in the U.S. Indian expatriates are among the largest expatriate groups in the U.S. and is due primarily to the increasing role of Indian companies in the U.S., especially in the information technology (IT) and IT-enabled services sector (FICCI, 2010). The U.S. Bureau of Consular Affairs (Nonimmigrant visas, 2012) indicates that Indian nationals are the largest recipients of nonimmigrant visas for specialty occupations in fields requiring highly specialized knowledge (H-1B visas), as well as intra-company transferees (L visas). Thus, this study examines the experience of the largest pool of expatriates in the U.S. – Indian expatriates. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that findings from this study may be unique to this group of expatriates and more research on other groups is needed for greater generalizability. The following section presents this study's research model and the theoretical rationale for each hypothesis.

1. Theory and hypotheses

Existing research on socialization argues that socialization is a two-step process comprising knowledge acquisition followed by adjustment (Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Saks, Gruman, & Cooper-Thomas, 2011). Consistent with this research, the current study hypothesizes that advice-seeking – the act of gaining knowledge in the form of work-related information and feedback from others – from HCN coworkers facilitates expatriate adjustment in terms of work (i.e., comfort with one's job) and interaction adjustment (i.e., comfort in interacting with HCNs), and in turn general adjustment (i.e., comfort with the cultural and general environment of the host country). This is so for two reasons. First, the advice sought can help reduce informational uncertainties expatriates often face in an unfamiliar host environment (Farh et al., 2010). Research suggests that newcomers acquire more knowledge through being proactive, as newcomers more precisely seek out the information they need at the pace they are comfortable with (Ashforth et al., 2007; Morrison, 1995). Second, in addition to actively engaging their HCN coworkers in generating advice needed to perform tasks and gain feedback, expatriates are also forming social relationships with those coworkers and becoming more socially integrated into the host context. As such, advice-seeking potentially benefits expatriates by facilitating their work, and interaction adjustment. In turn, positive experiences at work are likely to spillover to increase the overall comfort of living in the host country (i.e., general adjustment). In sum, the research model for this study hypothesizes that credibility and likability of HCN coworkers are associated with greater advice-seeking by expatriates, which, in turn, is directly associated with expatriate work and interaction adjustment, and indirectly with expatriate general adjustment. Further, expatriate advice-seeking from HCN coworkers will mediate the relationship between its antecedents (i.e., Perceived credibility and likability of HCN coworkers) and expatriate work and interaction adjustment (see Fig. 1).

1.1. Antecedents of expatriate advice-seeking from HCN coworkers

An individual's decision to seek advice from a source is made on the advice-seeker's judgment about the source. A common thread across independent streams of literature in organizational theory, psychology, and sociology suggests that individuals form interpersonal judgments about others on two universal dimensions. The first dimension is primarily cognitive and reflects how

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