

Individual differences and expatriate assignment effectiveness: The case of U.S.-based Korean expatriates[☆]

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Abstract

The paper examines the relationships among individual differences, cross-cultural adjustment, and expatriate assignment effectiveness, using a field survey of U.S.-based Korean expatriates. Overall, the findings are consistent with the literature and support previous findings. However, a unique and interesting pattern was found, revealing that how well the expatriates adjusted to the assignment was not related to their premature return intention. This finding is attributed to Korean society's tight cultural norms, expectancy for positive career outcomes when completing such assignments, and desire to provide diverse educational opportunities and life experiences for their children and family when staying in the preferred assignment destination. Theoretical and practical implications are also discussed.

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In today's global economy, effective expatriate assignments are important for multinational corporations. Since they may acquire a competitive advantage in international business operations from expatriates' international knowledge and experience (Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Zhang & Dodgson, 2007). Furthermore, expatriate assignments are often utilized as effective managerial development opportunities for employees, and therefore, the importance of these assignments will grow in the future (Carr, Inkson, & Thorn, 2005; Stroh, Black, Mendenhall, & Gregersen, 2005).

Recognizing the importance of expatriate assignments in multinational corporation management, researchers have found a myriad of factors influencing expatriate adjustment and assignment effectiveness (e.g., cross-cultural adjustment, job satisfaction, job performance, intention to return early), including individual, job, and organizational factors (see Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005, for a review). However, examining the role of individual differences in more diverse contexts may broaden our knowledge about valid predictors of expatriate assignment effectiveness (Molinsky, 2007; Ren, Harrison, Bhaskar-Shrinivas, & Shaffer, 2006). In particular, since the current literature has focused heavily on expatriate managers from the U.S., Europe, or Japan assigned to less developed countries, examining whether the results based on such samples could be similarly (or differently) applied to expatriate managers assigned to more developed countries would provide interesting and useful knowledge for managing human

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resources globally (Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004).

This study intends to contribute to the expatriate and cross-cultural management literature in two ways. First, it overcomes the research void by examining a unique, underrepresented sample (U.S.-based Korean expatriates) to investigate whether the results found by prior researchers are valid for this group. This is important to clarify if earlier work on U.S. expatriates working outside the U.S. will be consistent with findings for managers in different cultures (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Harvey, Novicevic, Buckley, & Fung, 2005), especially U.S.-based expatriates from other countries, considering that the U.S. is the second most popular assignment destination, following the U.K (SHRM, 2003). In addition, this study tries to advance the current literature by examining whether work and interaction adjustments mediate the relationship between individual differences and expatriate assignment effectiveness. Previous expatriate research implies that adjustment might mediate the relationship between various predictors and diverse expatriate assignment effectiveness (Jun & Gentry, 2005; Kim, Kirkman, & Chen, 2006; Kraimer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001), but few studies have examined these relationships involving individual differences (Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006). Thus, the examination of a mediating role for adjustment may deepen our knowledge about a potential underlying mechanism that is responsible for the effects of certain individual differences of U.S.-based Korean expatriates (i.e., self-monitoring, prior U.S. experience, English fluency) on their expatriate assignment effectiveness (Fig. 1).

Overall, this study would shed light on how U.S.-based Korean expatriate assignment effectiveness may be more fully explained by a model that more thoroughly examines these mediating variables. From a practical perspective, knowledge about why some people are more likely than others to succeed in

their U.S. expatriate assignments could offer Korean companies practical implications regarding selecting and training expatriates and providing them with organizational support, thereby effectively managing their expatriates around the world.

1. Theoretical background and hypotheses

Individual differences refer to characteristics of personality, experience, ability, education, gender, and so forth. These have been found to influence diverse work-related attitudes and behaviors including job satisfaction, performance, and turnover (e.g., Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001). Among others, it is well known that particular personality types and abilities may hold greater predictive validity for a certain job or task. In an expatriate context, personality differences have been emphasized as potential predictors of certain expatriate outcomes. For example, Ren et al. (2006) found that a socially desirable personality (i.e., conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness) is a negative predictor of health related strains and expatriate performance, while a superiority striving personality (i.e., extraversion, openness to experience) contributes positively to cultural adjustment. On the other hand, past international experience also may influence work attitudes, motivation, and performance of expatriates (Varma, Toh, & Budhwar, 2006). Based on such accumulated research, we argue that three specific individual differences – self-monitoring, prior U.S. experience, and English fluency – influence U.S.-based Korean expatriates' work-related behaviors.

1.1. Individual differences and cross-cultural work and interaction adjustment

Cross-cultural adjustment during an expatriate assignment is composed of three dimensions: work adjustment, interaction adjustment, and general life adjustment (Black, 1988). These dimensions are empirically well supported in the expatriate literature (Takeuchi, Yun, & Russell, 2002). Work adjustment refers to the adjustment to job responsibilities, supervision, and performance expectations. Interaction adjustment means the adjustment to socializing and communicating with host country nationals. General adjustment refers to life adjustment to housing, food, shopping, and so forth. These three dimensions of adjustment have been found to be influenced by the following factors: the nature of work (role clarity, discretion, conflict and novelty), organizational factors (supervisor, coworker and logistical support), non-work

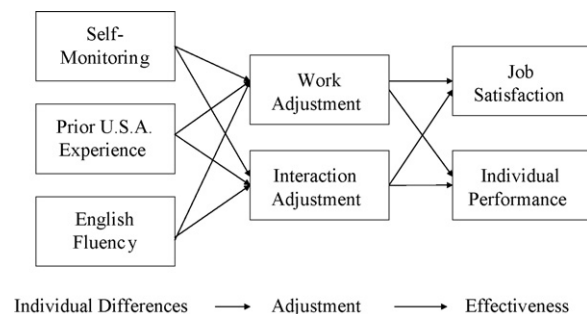


Fig. 1. The relationship between individual differences and expatriate assignment effectiveness.

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