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Managing Yopatriates: A Longitudinal Study of Generation Y Expatriates in an Indian Multi-national Corporation

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a study of HRM practices for a new category of expatriates - "Yopatriates" - who we note as young, highly qualified and mobile, Generation Y (Gen Y) knowledge workers. In contrast to traditional expatriates, Yopatriates typify non-traditional forms of expatriation wherein they seek short-term international assignments to suit their individual (internal, rather than organisational or external) career orientations of learning and travel. We study this group using a case study analysis of a large Indian Multi National Corporation (MNC) delivering global information technology (IT) and business process offshoring (BPO) services. Our study presents the HRM practices adopted to manage both expatriates as well as Yopatriates at the case organisation being studied within an India setting. We further evaluate the extent to which internal HR practices of Yopatriates were characterised, by a desire to emulate or adopt what were regarded as global 'HR best practices'. Our distinctive contribution lies in extending the literature by developing a distinctive theoretical category of non-traditional expatriates that (1) highlights a need for a different set of HRM practices; and (2) extends the theory of cultural adjustment in the context of Yopatriates. Evidence suggests that these practices were complementary and at the same time contradictory to 'indigenous' localised practices during the period of research and complied with two of the four arguments we make in our model.

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1. Introduction

Numerous classifications of working across national borders highlight an exciting debate about the differences in definitions, characteristics and the management of globally mobile workers. Traditional expatriates are typically assigned by the organisation for a period of between 2 and 5 years (Recihe and Harzing, 2011), as opposed to and non-traditional expatriates such as self-initiated expatriates, women and younger expatriates on short-term assignments of less than 2 years (Andresen et al., 2014) have been the subject of research for the past 30 years (Hippler et al., 2015). Further refinement of the research agenda into

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expatriation has seen a growing interest in global mobility and the impact of human resources management (HRM) from different geographic regions (Kawai and Mohr, 2015).

This paper is appropriately timed to address the definitional debates, typologies and distinguishing features of HR practices to manage distinct groups of non-traditional expatriates and explore the adjustment theorisation of one particular group: Generation Y or millennial expatriates. This study is timely because it extends the debates on how traditional versus non-traditional expatriates are managed using appropriate theoretical underpinnings such as generational and cultural adjustment theory within the international HRM literature and specifically answers the special issue's call to develop understanding within different geographical regions such as India. Our research explores the extent to which these established theoretical frames are applicable in the emerging country context of India's IT/BPO industry.

Practitioner reports suggest a steady increase in non-traditional expatriates (Brookfield, 2013a; Cartus, 2013; Ellis-Jones, 2015). However there is limited empirical research regarding the design and implementation of human resource management (HRM) practices of non-traditional expatriates. These trends also suggest an increasing number of non-traditional expatriates are younger, many of whom are Generation Ys or millennials, women and are highly qualified. An increasing number of globally mobile workers are from emerging market economies to both developing and developed economies. Although globalisation has transformed the way business and work is conducted; the complex, interlinked processes inadequately captured within the term globalisation have intensely local manifestations.

One context where this complex dynamic is played out is the Indian information technology and business process outsourcing (IT/BPO) industry. India as a nation has recently been noted as an important emerging market economy with a steady supply of not only migrant workers (Bach, 2011), but also, an increasing number of expatriates. This is especially true in the case of the IT/BPO industry (NASSCOM, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Gottipatti, 2012), especially as one estimate suggests India has the largest share of about \$US70 billions of expatriates' remittances to India (Feedbacq, 2013).

In this study, we develop a new and distinctive theoretical category of non-traditional expatriate who we refer to as Yopatriates, and define them as young, highly qualified and mobile, Generation Y (Gen Y) knowledge workers, who often work on short-term international assignments to fulfil their individual (internal, rather than organisational or external) career orientations of personal development and travel aspirations. We identify four main characteristics of Yopatriates. First, Gen Y represents the largest generational workforce (born between the years 1980–1995) and will continue to be a major proportion of the workforce (Ellis-Jones, 2015; Parry and Urwin, 2011; Srinivasan, 2012); second, Gen Y expatriates prefer short-term expatriate assignments (up to 18 months) (Brookfield, 2013b); third, Gen Ys have different values and attitudes towards various work characteristics such as 'geographical mobility', (Brookfield, 2013b); training and development and flexible hours (Myers, 2015) and developmental expatriation assignments (Shaw and Fairhurst, 2008) rather than the typical strategic/information dissemination or other traditional roles fulfilled by the conventional expatriates (Dowling et al., 2013).

We study this group of employees using a case study design (Yin, 2014) in an extremely large (over 250,000 employees), diverse and complex Indian MNC delivering global IT/BPO services. We analyse the extent and nature of specific HRM practices evident in this MNC for their increasing population of Yopatriates and to understand whether cultural adjustment during their expatriation is different to traditional expatriates. Large IT/BPO firms operating in India, including this MNC, have sent nearly a third of their employees on an expatriate assignment at some stage of their employee's careers (Gottipatti, 2012; Saraswati, 2012). A significant percentage of its employees are under the age of 34. Thus our research setting, a fast-growing Indian IT/BPO MNC, can provide rich insights into the HRM practices of both traditional and non-traditional expatriates.

We argue that Yopatriates are expected to undertake multiple short-term expatriate assignments and are more likely to exhibit Gen Y and knowledge worker values, attitudes and behaviours (Brookfield, 2013b). Extant research has identified significant differences exist between attracting, motivating and retaining knowledge relative to other workers. Furthermore, the literature on Gen Y (Benson and Brown, 2011; Cugin, 2012) suggests there are significant differences in values and attitudes between managing Gen Y and other generational groupings of employees (see recent research in the Indian IT industry context by Pereira et al., 2015). Understandably then, there are likely to be potential issues of intergenerational differences in the management of these groups. Thus, HR practices of non-traditional expatriates (Yopatriates, in this case) underpin the rationale and research questions which this paper seeks to address. Our research is undertaken in the context of a large Indian IT/BPO MNC, for confidentiality reasons, the case is hereinafter referred to as 'Alpha'. Our overarching aim is to extend our understanding of managing Gen Y expatriates (Yopatriates) and answer the following research questions:

1. What are the key differences between the expatriate adjustment processes of traditional expatriates and Yopatriates?
2. How did Alpha's HRM practices evolve over a period of time to manage expatriate adjustment issues of its increasing number of Yopatriates in organisations and what were the key factors influencing such changes?

We contribute in the following four ways. First, we identify a new nomenclature of non-traditional expatriates i.e. Yopatriates and argue that they should be managed differently than traditional expatriates mainly due to generational differences between the two groups. Second, we contribute through our case study, evidence of how Yopatriates are managed in the context of knowledge intensive industries such as Alpha. Third, we contribute by presenting a detailed account of the evolution of HR practices employed in managing Yopatriates over a five year period at Alpha. Fourth, we contribute by extending Black et al. (1991)'s uncertainty reduction theory by integrating the learnings from intergenerational theory and this research and by exploring how the chosen case study organisation managed and reduced the uncertainty for this new type of expatriates i.e. the Yopatriates over a five year period of study.

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