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## Engineers selecting a country to work abroad: The critical factors to decide

Yiannis Xenidis<sup>a,\*</sup>, Maria Gallou<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Civil Engineering, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki 54124, Greece*

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### Abstract

The decision to work abroad is influenced from a great number of factors, including cultural, social and psychological ones, which are also critical for a successful adjustment to the host country. The decision should be the outcome of a very delicate decision-making process, which, however, is currently not available as both literature and practice clearly indicate. This paper attempts to identify and analyze those factors with an impact on the selection of the country to work abroad in the case of engineers. An extensive literature review revealed all the factors related to the expatriation and relocation issues of an expatriate focusing rather on the socio-cultural and personal dimensions, than those of the working environment and job satisfaction, which are related to the job's description. Based on the findings of the literature review an international questionnaire survey for engineers was prepared and conducted aiming at: a) evaluating these factors, in terms of importance for the potential expatriate and b) deciding on their use in a formal methodology for the selection of a country to work abroad. The collected data were statistically analyzed and the correlations between the factors were investigated to identify those among them that are critical to include in a formal country selection process. A major finding of this research is that the field's literature highlights a different set of critical factors compared to those indicated by the questionnaire survey. Furthermore, a second important finding is that the critical factors present very loose correlations, which indicates that any model aiming at supporting the decision-making process for selecting the country to work abroad should introduce them very carefully. The two findings lead to the conclusion that a proper selection of the factors to incorporate into a country selection method process is required.

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +302310995525; fax: +302310995802.  
E-mail address: [ioxen@civil.auth.gr](mailto:ioxen@civil.auth.gr)

## 1. Introduction

Deciding for a job offer in a foreign country is a complex task because of the various factors that influence such a decision. Acceptance or rejection of such an offer largely depends on parameters that are not directly related to the job offer itself (e.g. working environment, salary level, career path, etc.), but on the capacity of the expatriate employee to adjust to the new working conditions. The existing literature on the topic is focused on the identification of those factors with an impact to the final decision (e.g. demographic, cultural, personal traits, etc.) and the description of the correlations of those factors – individually or in groups – to the decision ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], etc).

This paper presents the first step towards the development of a methodology for engineer to select a country to work abroad. In specific, this paper presents the findings of the analysis of the factors that influence an engineer's selection of the country to work abroad, in order to identify the most critical among them and include them in a systematic methodology for the respective decision-making process. The research focuses only on the factors related to the adjustment capacity of the expatriate excluding those which are related to the job characteristics. The remainder of this paper shortly presents the context of the research topic and the existing proposals for a methodological approach to it. Successively, it presents in detail research results on the criticality of the decision-making criteria, which is determined with the use of a correlation analysis of data collected through a questionnaire survey. The originality of this research lies in the fact that for the first time the identified factors are investigated as a whole and not individually or partially (e.g. in small groups of two or three elements). This research approach results in very interesting findings that are properly discussed, thus leading to significant conclusions.

## 2. The influencing factors for selecting a country to work

Expatriating for professional reasons is, currently, an increasing phenomenon, which spans all geographic regions and all socio-economic classes of the population in developing and developed countries [6]. Previous research has identified several factors that have an impact on this phenomenon, irrespective of the type of job of the expatriate.

Selmer and Lauring [2] and Carr et al. [7] in their studies identified five categories of motives to expatriate: a) career development, b) financial incentives, c) family reasons, d) life change/escape, and e) adventure/ travel. Richardson and Mallon [8] and Richardson and McKenna [9] focused their research on professionals in academia and identified similar categories of motives to expatriate.

Dickmann and Mills [10] propose the factor of location in addition to career and developmental considerations, organizational factors, individual motivation, social life considerations and national factors, which - according to their extensive literature review - constitute the most influential factors in deciding to work abroad. The location factor, according to Dickmann et al. [5], corresponds to the capacity of the expatriate to adjust to a different culture and different living conditions; cultural distances and adaptation processes, and emotional and intellectual adjustment to new environments have attracted the interest of other researchers as well [11].

Ward and Kennedy [12] broadly identified the psychological and socio-cultural domains for analyzing the cross-cultural adaptation issue. The psychological domain is associated with personal traits and understanding of situations such as satisfaction, socialization, etc., while the socio-cultural domain is associated with behavioral competencies and the capacity of an individual to acquire knowledge and skills. A similar approach is suggested in the context of Social Cognitive Career Theory where career interests and career choice goals for employees are determined based on both: a) cognitive properties and environmental factors, either experienced or anticipated by the employees and b) environmental opportunities, support and barriers that the employees experience or expect to experience [4]. Personal agency constitutes a critical factor for the decision to expatriate, since it is positively related to the employee's belief that he/she can, successfully, confront the challenges in a new culture [4].

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