



CQ at work and the impact of intercultural training: An empirical test among foreign laborers

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ABSTRACT

This study was an examination into the relationships among cultural intelligence (CQ), cross-cultural adjustment, perceived effectiveness of intercultural training, and job involvement. The data were obtained from foreign laborers from the Philippine Islands who were working in Taiwan. Paper-based questionnaires ($n = 600$) were distributed with 393 valid returns in two months for a return rate of 65.5%. The results of hierarchical regression analyses indicated that CQ is a significant predictor for job involvement. For the mediation effect, one dimension of the cross-cultural adjustment-work adjustment mediated the CQ-job involvement relationship. Furthermore, intercultural training enhanced the positive relationship of CQ and work adjustment. The present study demonstrated that CQ is critical for the success of intercultural effectiveness during an international assignment. Moreover, it is essential to provide continuing cross-cultural training in order to assist foreign laborers in adjusting to the local culture and thus becoming more highly involved in their work. Herein, the implications, limitations, and recommendations are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Currently, the forces of the free market economy, the pace of trade globalization, and human and nonhuman resource mobilization all are undergoing change (Osman-Gani & Zidan, 2001). There has been a particularly sharp increase in work-force mobility among Asian countries. Both skilled and unskilled workers now move freely between jobs: expatriates, inpatriates, global managers, sojourners, business travelers, and particularly foreign laborers. The foreign laborers from the Southeast and South Asian countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Thailand usually are employed in demeaning and unskilled jobs (Findlay, Jones, & Davidson, 1998). Most of the unskilled laborers who have been issued a working permit work overseas in other Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, China, and Taiwan. Foreign laborers are engaged in dangerous, difficult, and dirty jobs that local workers/laborers are unwilling to do (Ang, Van Dyne, & Begley, 2003). Obviously, given the importance of an employed foreign workforce, companies often consider them to be essential and indispensable to their business. Never before has the role of foreign laborers been as important to a corporation's competitiveness and workforce mobility (Findlay et al., 1998; Chen, Lin, & Tsai, 2013).

Taiwan, one of the East Asia countries, provides a good example. Since the 1990s, Taiwan has experienced economic transformation. The economic structure has shifted from labor-intensive industries to technology-intensive industries. Taiwan focuses on high-tech, is more R&D driven, and, since 1992, Taiwan has opened its labor market in order to solve

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its labor-shortage problems (Lan, 2003). In January 2015, there were a total of 556,412 foreign laborers in Taiwan (Ministry of Labor (MOL)¹, 2015). Among them, 20.2% were from Philippines, 27.4% were from Vietnam, 10.8% were from Thailand, and 41.6% were from Indonesia. In particular, laborers from the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam are employed mainly in Taiwan's manufacturing and construction industry, yet laborers from Indonesia are employed mainly in the social welfare industry.² The employed foreign laborers often find themselves working in a newly diverse cultural environment and feel challenged to adjust in a new work-life environment, suffering a different social culture, non-native language, and changed climatic conditions (Crocker, 2002; Earley, Ang, & Tan, 2006). According to Chen, Lin, and Sawangpattanakul (2011), some problems identified with respect to foreign laborers working in Taiwan include unexcused absences, neglect of orders from supervisors, misconduct, and job performance at a much slower pace than normal, all of which results in conflicts with employers/supervisors and fellow employees. All of those problems may not be limited to adjustment conflicts. These may also be caused by passive job involvement, which leads to a host of negative outcomes.

From the perspective of an organization's management, any organization requires all employees to exhibit full energy and confidence and to demonstrate sufficient specific intelligence in order to complete the assigned work, regardless of their origin (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). This extension of basic work intelligence has recently emerged, and is referred to as cultural intelligence (CQ).

Grounded in the established stream of intelligence research, CQ is a theoretical extension of Gardner's (1993, 2011) multiple facets of intelligence. Many empirical studies have demonstrated that CQ plays a noticeable and increasingly important role in measuring a person's intelligence in adapting to a new cultural context. (Ang et al., 2007; Earley & Ang, 2003). CQ goes beyond the relatively simple ability to understand the language of a culture (Ramalu, Rose, Kumar, & Uli, 2010). Studies have shown that a higher level of CQ helps increase an employee's ability to adjust their behavior accordingly in order to perform more effectively in unfamiliar work and non-working environments (Earley & Ang, 2003; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Rosen, Digh, Phillips, & Rosen, 2000).

CQ holds great promise to explain why some people interact and adapt more effectively than others when immersed in a foreign culture. However, a person's adjustment level is more than simply a linear relationship with CQ. Research has also pointed out that intercultural training tends to focus more effort on the training of adjustments to work and living in a host country. The issues of training for adjustment to interacting with host nationals and adjustment to the general environment have been regarded as essential issues (Suutari & Burch, 2001; Vance & Paik, 2002). Foreign laborers working in Taiwan make a good example, as adjustment problems occur not only in the work environment but also in non-work environments where they can be misunderstood or become frustrated with the local culture. Given these adjustment issues, questions arise as to whether or not the foreign laborers need sufficient intercultural training before they leave their home country. That is to say, providing cultural training is the most effective when it is designed to be relative to specific trainees such as foreign laborers in a specific context, and when it is begun prior to the trainees' departure from their home culture and continues periodically during their stay in the host country.

Therefore, the present study sought to address three gaps in the literature. First, CQ has been studied among a wide variety of contexts such as among expatriates (Ang, Van Dyne, Koh, & Ng, 2004; Ang et al., 2007; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Huff, Song, & Gresch, 2014; Malek & Budhwar, 2013; Ramalu et al., 2010; Templer, Tay, & Chandrasekar, 2006), business travelers (Tay, Westman, & Chia, 2008), intercultural negotiators (Imai & Gelfrand, 2010), and international students (Chen, Wu, & Bian, 2014; Lin, Chen, & Song, 2012); In particular, many studies in the field of human resources have explored the expatriate issue and discussed how to help them adjust to foreign cultures (Kim & Slocum, 2008; Tucker, Bonial, & Lahti, 2004). This adjustment has rarely been studied in the domain of foreign laborers.

Second, over the past decade, the theory of CQ has gained prominence due to its impact on various indicators such as cross-cultural adaptation (Ang et al., 2007, 2004; Ward & Fischer, 2008) and performance in a global business context (Chen et al., 2011; Lee & Sukoco, 2010; Oolders, Chernyshenko, & Stark, 2008). However, there is a lack of research on the day-to-day experiences of using individual CQ to navigate cross-cultural transitions that affect work or job involvement, particularly for the population of foreign laborers working in Taiwan.

Third, when they lack an understanding of cultural differences, foreign laborers/workers are likely to be overwhelmed by unfamiliar cultural norms, rules, and values. Based on Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), the results from the present study show that being well-adjusted involves learning socially appropriate norms via intercultural training, and that social learning enhances cultural effectiveness, further resulting in a psychological involvement in one's job. As Black and Mendenhall (1990a) have suggested, the more rigorous the intercultural training, the more effective the trainee will be at actually and appropriately demonstrating a high level of learning capability in order to confront greater difficulties in adjusting to a local culture and work environment. Thus, it is very important to understand how the effectiveness of intercultural training for foreign laborers helps their adjustment level and further impacts their job involvement while working in a host country setting.

Fourth, in this study, we deliberately selected foreign laborers instead of expatriates to conduct this study. We consider foreign laborers to have fewer resources than the expatriates during the overseas assignment, since expatriates are sent

¹ data were retrieved from <http://statdb.mol.gov.tw/html/mon/c12040.pdf>

² Social welfare industry refers to the employment of migrant caretakers. The tasks usually involved taking care of the severely ill or disabled. In 1992, the MOL of Taiwan granted work permits to migrant workers and categorized them as "social welfare foreign workers."

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