

Relationship Between Competencies, Cultural Adjustment and job Performance in the ICT Sector

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationships and impact of competencies on performance and the mediating role of cultural adjustment of expatriates engaged in the ICT sector in Malaysia. Based on a quantitative survey with a sample of 301 expatriates, the findings of this study revealed that emotional competencies have the highest influence on the job performance of expatriates. The results revealed that emotional, job related and social competencies have a strong relationship with performance of expatriates. The findings also support the role of cultural adjustment in mediating the relationship between competencies and performance. The findings of this study support the results from some earlier studies and also bring out several new ideas such as the importance of emotional competencies as compared to the other competencies. The findings of this study have significantly contributed to the advancement of knowledge in job performance and cultural adjustment and it is evident that expatriate competencies facilitate expatriates job performance and cultural adjustment. The implications are in the areas of expatriate selection, training and support practices. The results of this study will add to the current body of knowledge as well as assist in creating foundational solutions to ensure success in expatriate global assignments in Malaysia.

Key Words: Cultural Adjustment, Performance, Expatriate and Competencies.

Introduction

Today's global workplace is more complex and as the competition for international talent picks up steam, companies are increasingly looking to enhance their mobility policies to attract and retain key global talent (KPMG, 2012). The implementation of global strategies depends on selecting the right people but global organizations are facing strategic challenges (Dewhurst, Harris, & Heywood, 2012). The essential component in creating such competitive advantage is the human capital that encompasses competencies and abilities of the workforce (Dewhurst et al., 2012). For competitive advantage, organizations depend on the performance of expatriates (Palthe, 2004). Expatriates may face challenges in intercultural effectiveness in a multi-cultural country like Malaysia and inter-cultural skills and competencies are important (Solomon & Schell, 2009). Researchers attest to the importance of some individual factors and competencies in predicting cultural adjustment and performance in global assignments (Bhaskar, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Arthur & Bennet, 1995).

Malaysia is opening its market towards globalization. In 2014, MSC Malaysia recorded an increase of 9,497 jobs and the total number of jobs stood at 147,568(MSC, 2014). However, in the ICT sector in Malaysia, the availability of innovative local talents for research and innovation activities is a major challenge and this problem is being addressed by importing foreign talents (PIKOM, 2012). Malaysia is still a difficult place for expatriates to integrate (HSBC Explorer Survey, 2012).

Having the right people to manage businesses is a critical success factor in international operations (Dowling, Festing & Engle, 2008). Many companies find deploying talent in emerging markets to be a major challenge (Dewhurst et al., 2012). Failure in global assignments is not only very risky but also costly (Perkins, 2006). A survey found that more than half of the companies in USA had failure rates of 10% - 20% (Tung, 1982). Based on a survey by KPMG (2012), 55% of the respondents stated that up to 5% of assignees were recalled from the host country or dismissed because of inability to perform effectively. Direct costs of expatriation may be as high as three times the domestic salary (Dowling et al., 2008). The indirect costs are harder to quantify but can be more expensive (Dowling et al., 2008). Failure also leads to negative organizational outcomes such as delayed productivity (Bennett, Aston, & Colquhoun, 2000).

Prior research on job performance and cultural adjustment has established that several factors such as relational skills, personality and technical skills are important predictors of expatriate success (Templer, 2010; Suutari & Brewster, 1997). Researchers have generally focused on specific issues without examining holistically the impact and relationship of expatriate competencies towards job performance and cultural adjustment (e.g., Arthur & Bennet, 1995). This has led to piecemeal understanding of cultural adjustment and performance rather than as an integrated theoretical framework. Despite the growing interest in expatriates, several gaps remain in understanding the relationship between competencies, job performance and cultural adjustment. It is still not certain whether competencies is a determinant of performance in the ICTS sector in Malaysia and whether there is a mediating effect of cultural adjustment in the relationships.

For this research, a survey involving respondents from the ICT sector in Malaysia was undertaken. The objective was to examine holistically how competencies can lead to successful cultural adjustment and performance of expatriates' in the ICT sector. This study established the best competency indicator to measure expatriate performance and examined the mediating role of cultural adjustment. A clear understanding of which competencies contribute to expatriate adjustment and job performance would aid decision makers and human resource professionals in the design of appropriate human resource practices, selection mechanism and training programs.

Literature Review

Emotional Competencies and Job Performance

In a foreign country, the expatriate is expected to face uncertainties that may impact job performance. Emotional Intelligence (EI) improves an individual's effectiveness and performance in an occupational setting (Goleman, 1998). Expatriates who possess the appropriate EI will perform better in their job (Gabel, Dolan & Cerdin, 2005; Aykan, 2014). Researchers have stated that EI is an important predictor of performance and work related outcomes (Aykan, 2014; Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005). A number of different viewpoints and theories have emerged about what EI actually is (Neale, Spencer-Arnell, & Wilson, 2009). Researchers and scholars have argued that EI provides a foundation for emotional competencies (Goleman, 1998). Research by Goleman (1998) revealed that EI is more important than IQ and technical skills. People who are high in EI are also more likely to perceive context-driven emotion patterns and are therefore better able to adapt (Lillis & Tian, 2009). Cherniss (2000) pointed out a person's ability to perceive, identify, and manage emotions provides the basis for the kinds of social and emotional competencies that are important for success in any job. A positive relationship was found between emotional competence and contextual performance (Aykan, 2014). The positive relationship between emotional competencies and performance is supported by several researchers (e.g., Mishra & Mohapatra, 2010; Araujo & Taylor, 2012).

H1: Emotional competencies are positively related to performance of expatriates.

Social Competencies and Job Performance

Researchers have identified social competencies as one of the critical personal qualities that are linked with performance (Witt & Ferris, 2003; Hochwarter, Will, Treadway, & Ferris, 2006). Social skill leads to increased interactions with host country nationals (Hochwarter et al., 2006). Relational and communication abilities may increase the probability of successful performance considerably (Templer, 2010; Peltokorpi, 2008). Jordan and Cartwright (1998) outlined relational skills as one of the criteria that contribute to performance of expatriates. Through relational skills, expatriates can get more information (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991). Tung (1994) stated that expatriates holding technical positions must also be able to manage people effectively and this requires relational skills. Hochwater et al. (2006) found that social skills predicted a measure of job performance that included both task and contextual components. Liu and Schaffer (2005) found that social capital had the greatest influence on expatriate adjustment and performance. Researchers have pointed out that language skills may be regarded as of critical importance for some expatriate positions, but lesser in others (Dowling et al., 2008). The more the expatriate interacts with host nationals, the more they will receive information and as a consequence, the expatriate will be able to perform better in the new environment (Lee & Sokoco, 2010).

H2: Social competencies are positively related to performance of expatriates on global assignments.

Job Related Competencies and Job Performance

Past research has shown a relationship between job related competencies and performance (Templer, 2010; Tungli & Peiperl, 2009). A wide array of technical and job related skills have been stated by researchers (Bolino & Feldman 2000; Arthur et al., 1995). Technical competence increases the expatriates' self-confidence and this in turn encourages the expatriate to learn and execute new behaviors (Aycan, 1997). Researchers have stressed that IT professionals must continually align their competencies with new technological innovation and changing organizational technological climates (Wingreen & Blanton, 2007). Researchers have argued that technical skills are by no means a sufficient criterion and decision makers should not only focus on technical expertise when selecting expatriates (Templer, 2010). Robles (2012) suggested that soft skills are just as good an indicator of job performance as traditional job qualifications. Tung (1998) pointed out that it is important that the expatriates be flexible, resourceful and creative. In the ICT sector, technical job know-how is regarded as critical. Lack of innovative talents and know-how may be the reasons why many managers are sent overseas (Newlands & Hooper, 2009).

H3: Job related competencies are positively related to performance of expatriates on global assignments.

Cultural Adjustment as Mediator of the Relationship between Emotional Competencies and Job Performance

Past research reveals the growing recognition of the role played by individual factors and expatriates responses to cultural encounters (Gabel et al., 2005; Bhatti, Battour & Ismail, 2013). Higher EI has been reported to contribute to better cultural adjustment and performance (e.g., Lii & Wong, 2008; Gullekson & Tucker, 2012). The expatriates' psychological comfort determines how well he will adjust in the new environment (Lee & Sukoco, 2008). Culture has an impact on the emotional display and the expectations of emotions displayed (Tan, Hartel, Panipucci, & Strybosch, 2005). EI can mitigate the potential negative effects that might arise while working in the host country (Lillis & Tian, 2009). In the host country, expatriates are subjected to uncertainties and as Hofstede (1980) stated, "the forced exposure to alien cultural environment can put people under heavy stress". An expatriate with higher EI has better emotional control (Lii & Wong, 2008). Poor adjustment in the host country manifests itself in intentions to quit the assignment prematurely or foster other forms of input reduction (Bhaskar, et al., 2005). Research has

shown that variables such as self-efficacy which is related to emotional competencies, positively influences expatriates job performance by means of expatriate adjustment (Bhatti et al., 2013).

H4: The relationship between emotional competencies and job performance is mediated by cultural adjustment.

Cultural Adjustment as Mediator of the Relationship between Social Competencies and Job Performance

Past research has shown that social relationships are one of the critical predictors of cultural adjustment (Lee, 2005; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002). Social interactions in the host country enable expatriates to receive information and reduce uncertainties (Lin, 2001; Bhatti et al., 2013). Relational skills positively predict expatriates adjustment and subsequently adjustment uniquely affects job satisfaction, withdrawal cognitions, and performance (Bhaskar et al., 2005). The process of communication, relationships and social networking will positively affect cultural adjustment and greater interaction enhances the expatriates' ability to have positive attitudes towards people and improve perceptions (Church, 1982; Abe & Wiseman; 1983). Through social capital within social networks, the level of information received will improve and social relations and cultural adjustment (Lin, 2001; Lee, 2005). Social interactions can provide expatriates with the emotional support that helps them overcome the negative feelings (Caligiuri, et al., 2002). Past research has shown that cultural sensitivity positively influences expatriate job performance through expatriate adjustment (Bhatti et al., 2013). Studies suggested that that the more expatriates interact with host nationals; the more likely they are to become cross-culturally adjusted (e.g., Caligiuri, 2000).

H5: The relationship between social competencies and job performance is mediated by cultural adjustment.

Cultural Adjustment as Mediator of the Relationship between Job Related Competencies and Job Performance

Research has revealed that higher technical skills contribute towards better cultural adjustment (e.g., Templer, 2010; Hawes & Kealey, 1981). In the ICT sector, technical skills play an important role in determining expatriate work adjustment (Aycan, 1997). With technical skills, expatriates can increase the expatriate's self-confidence and minimize stress (Aycan, 1997). Expatriates would not be able to perform on their jobs and would not be accepted and trusted by host-country employees if they lack job knowledge (Hawes & Kealey, 1981). Higher technical competence will result in increase of trust of coworkers and the expatriates' credibility and trust is particularly important (Aycan, 1997; Ang, 2013). However, the level of importance placed on technical criteria compared to other competencies is questioned in various studies (e.g., Aycan, 1997). For expatriates, acquiring technical skills sets often requires them to broaden their technical knowledge beyond what is required of a domestic job (Earley & Ang, 2003). Past research has shown that cultural adjustment can be a mediator (Bhaskar et al., 2005).

H6: The relationship between job related competencies and job performance is mediated by cultural adjustment.

Methodology and Research Design

Research Design

This was a quantitative research using survey where the primary purpose is to identify the relationship between the variables. Primary data was collected using a questionnaire as there is no adequate secondary data available.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The target population was expatriates working in the ICT sector in Malaysia. Probability sampling method was used where a list of companies' and the population elements was prepared and used as a sampling frame based on list of expatriates provided by ICT companies and various directories of International Business Chambers of Commerce in Malaysia. Email response rates may only approximate 25% to 30% without follow-up (Sheehan, 2001). With a return rate of 30%, 900 target respondents were randomly selected. The initial response rate was low (12 percent) and friendly reminders were sent. A total of 247 questionnaires were received through mail and 71 through direct distribute and collect method. Out of the 318 questionnaires, only 301 questionnaires were usable.

Instrumentation

Four demographic variables (gender, marital status, age and length of stay) were included. The fixed alternative questions required the respondents to choose the best answer based on a five- point Likert-type scale. The questions for the dependent variable were adopted from the study by Caligiuri (1997). Job performance was divided into four dimensions: Contextual/Managerial Dimension, Contextual/Prosocial Dimension, Expatriate Specific Dimension and Technical Performance Dimension. The questions on emotional competencies were adopted from the study by Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002). For social competencies, the questions were adapted from Black et al. (1991), Borman, Motowidlo (1993) and Liu and Schaffer (2005). For job related competencies, the questions were adapted from the studies by Bolino et al., (2000) and Arthur et al., (1995). For the mediating variable, the questions were adapted from past research by Bhaskar et al. (2005), Black et al., (1991) and Black and Stephens (1989).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability is the extent to which a variable or set of variables is consistent in what it is intended to measure (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Validity addresses whether the research measures what is said would be measured (Pallant, 2010). The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the dependent variable was 0.920 and for the independent variables was 0.924, 0.908 and 0.910 respectively. The Cronbach's alpha value was above 0.7 and this is considered acceptable (Pallant, 2010). Pilot testing of the questionnaire was done and this provided with some idea of the questionnaire's face validity (Saunders, Lewis & Thornbill, 2009). Experts were asked to comment on the representativeness and suitability of the questions (Saunders et al., 2009). In this study, the results showed a strong correlation value of .771 and this indicates that the scale is measuring its intended concept (Hair et al., 2006).

Data Analyses

Normality testing, correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis were undertaken. A check for violations of linearity and homoscedasticity was done (Pallant, 2010). Multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypothesis as there was a single dependent variable (DV) and several independent variables (IVs) (Hair et al., 2006). Mediation testing was based on the steps stated by Baron and Kenny (1986). At the first step, the IV must significantly impact the mediating variable. In the second step, the IV must significantly impact the DV. In the third step, the mediating variable must significantly impact the DV. Complete mediation would occur if inclusion of the mediation variable drops the relationship between the IV and DV variable to zero (Hair et al., 2006).

Results and Discussion

The sample of respondents included 71% (n=214) male 29% (n=87) female. The majority of the respondents, 57% (n=172) were married. The respondents age included 41% (n=123) between the age range of 26 to 30 years, 29% (n=87) between the age range of 31 to 35 years and 3% (n=9) above the age

of 45 years. The majority of the respondents, 34% (n=102) stayed for more than 3 years. The participants are come from various countries with majority 59 (19.6%) were from India, 47 (15.6%) from Europe, 51 (16.9%) from ASEAN countries, 29 (9.7%) and the rest from other countries.

As shown in Table 1, all the bivariate correlations between (IVs) and the (DV) were positive. The Pearson's bivariate correlation showed that the correlation between the IVs and DV was supported. The correlation coefficient was ($r=.722$, $.761$ and $.733$) respectively. This suggests that there was a strong relationship between competencies and performance. An increase in competencies will result in a high increase in the performance. The correlation coefficient was also statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 Pearson Correlation coefficient

	PER	EC	SC	JC	CA
PER	1.000				
EC	.722**	1.000			
SC	.683**	.761**	1.000		
JC	.685**	.717**	.733**	1.000	
CA	.628**	.648**	.654**	.647**	1.000

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

PER=Performance; EC= Emotional Competencies; SC= Social Competencies; JC= Job Related Competencies; CA= Cultural Adjustment

Table 2 Overall Model Fit

Multiple R	.771
Coefficient of Determination (<i>R square</i>)	.594
Adjusted R square	.588
Standard Error of estimate	5.50699
Durbin Watson	1.806

In Table 2, the relevant values to address issues concerning both overall model fit as well as the stepwise estimation of the regression model are shown (Hair et al., 2006). An 'R' value of .771 indicates that the correlation between the IVs and DV is high. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = .594$) means that 59 percent of the variance in the DV was being explained by the IVs. The Adjusted R Square of .588 means that it accounted for 59% of the variance in the criterion variable even after taking into account the number of predictor variables in the model. The Durbin-Watson result is 1.806 and this indicates no problem of autocorrelation (Chinna, Karunthan & Yuen, 2013).

In Table 3, the standardized Beta coefficient shows the strength of relationship between an IV and DV (Hair et al., 2006). All IVs had a stronger relationship and gave significant impact to the performance of expatriates. Based on the above results, hypothesis H1, H2, and H3 were proven. Emotional competencies with standardized regression value of .373 are most predictive. Job related and social competencies have a smaller but significant effect.

Hypothesis H4, H5 and H6 predicted that cultural adjustment would mediate the relationship between competencies and job performance. Baron and Kenny (1986) proposed four step approach in which several regression analyses were conducted and significance of the coefficients was examined at each step was done (Table 4).

Table 4 Mediation Testing

Hypothesis Regression Analysis	Analysis/Step	Relationship	R	R ²	ΔR^2	Beta	Sig.
H4: EC, CA & PER	Analysis-1	PER on EC	.722	.521		.722	.000
	Analysis-2	CA on EC	.648	.420		.648	.000
	Analysis-3:Step 1	PER on CA	.628	.394		.276	.000
	Analysis-3:Step 2	PER on EC	.752	.565	.171	.543	.000
H5: SC, CA & PER	Analysis-1	PER on SC	.683	.466		.683	.000
	Analysis-2	CA on SC	.654	.427		.654	.000
	Analysis-3:Step 1	PER on CA	.628	.394		.317	.000
	Analysis-3:Step 2	PER on EC	.724	.523	.130	.476	.000
H6: SC, CA & PER	Analysis-1	PER on EC	.685	.469		.685	.000
	Analysis-2	CA on EC	.647	.419		.647	.000
	Analysis-3:Step 1	PER on CA	.628	.394		.317	.000
	Analysis-3:Step 2	PER on EC	.726	.528	.134	.480	.000

The regression coefficients at step two in Analysis 3 showed that all three competencies are significantly and positively related to expatriate performance, thus meeting the condition for mediation. The beta for controlled regulation (path c), which was significant in the first analysis, was now still significant when controlling for the effects of the MV. The regression coefficient was reduced at the final step, but remained significant. The change in R² for emotional, social and job related competencies was .171, .130, and .134 respectively. This indicated that the IVs explain an impact on performance even when the effects of the control variables are statistically controlled. The results of this study based on Baron and Kenny (1986) proposed series of three regressions shows that there is evidence of partial mediating effect and hypothesis H4, H5 and H6 were proven.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of competencies on the performance of expatriates and the mediating role of cultural adjustment. The results of this study revealed that the emotional, social and job related competencies have an influence on performance of expatriates in the ICTs sector. The results showed that out of the three attributes, emotional competencies stood out as the attribute of highest importance. Support was found for bulk of the conceptual framework and the research questions that were made in this research study but on the other hand, results showed that all the attributes were important, but were not of equal importance. Higher levels of cultural adjustment will result in better performance through higher emotional competencies, social competencies and job related competencies. The findings emphasize the criticality of expatriate performance and cultural adjustment in the ICTs sector in Malaysia. Organizations can strengthen their expatriates' performance and achieve competitive advantage by developing stronger links between competencies, cultural adjustment and performance. In general, the findings of the present study found some consistencies with results of prior studies (e.g., Mishra & Mohapatra, 2010; Gabel, Dolan, & Cerdin, 2005; Chen, Kirkman, Kim, Farh, & Tangirala, 2010; Aykan, 2014).

The findings will also provide theoretical and practical implications for managing expatriates and offer an alternative viewpoint. This research helps to fill the research gaps, hence adds to the literature of expatriates performance and adjustment. This is one of the first studies to examine the relationships between competencies, cultural adjustment and performance of expatriates engaged in the ICTs sector in Malaysia. The evidence from this study contains implications for companies in selecting, training and providing support to expatriates. Human resource managers should consider these competencies before

engaging expatriates. Training is necessary for expatriates with lower levels of emotional, social or job related competencies. Knowledge of Malaysian culture is also necessary and training should be undertaken. Efforts to increase expatriate competencies may assist to increase positive outcomes such as performance and cultural adjustment. Organizations can adopt some strategies to improve cultural adjustment and performance of expatriates. Individuals can also adopt strategies to overcome stress and improve cultural adjustment and performance. The findings are also expected to assist in creating foundational solutions to support successful performance by expatriates engaged by organizations operating in the ICTs sector in Malaysia. The findings of this study may also be generally applied to predict expatriates performance and cultural adjustment in the ASEAN region.

A limitation of this study was that all data for this study was collected via a self-reported questionnaire that could be susceptible to bias and it is recommended that future studies improve the design by gathering data from multiple sources. Another limitation of this study was that the expatriate adjustment and performance was not tracked over time. A longitudinal study could serve as an important extension of the findings of this study. There can be other moderators and mediators such as training that should be examined in future studies. The limitations of this study provide directions for future research.

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