Indian Information Technology expatriates on an international assignment: Impact of pre-departure preparation on initial adjustment

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INDIAN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY EXPATRIATES ON AN INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENT: IMPACT OF PRE-DEPARTURE PREPARATION ON INITIAL ADJUSTMENT

Abstract

Effective preparation constitutes an important factor in ensuring the success of an expatriate assignment. Research has identified cross-cultural training as one of the key aspects in achieving inter-cultural effectiveness on an international assignment. However, there has been little attempt to explore this concept in an Indian information technology (IT) context. The study reported in this paper adopted a qualitative approach to explore the preparation of IT professionals from Indian IT multinational companies (MNCs) sent to Australia. Based on information gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with Indian IT professionals in Australia, this research indicates how factors during the preparation for the assignment influence their expectations and impact on their initial adjustment experience.

Keywords: international human resource management, cross-cultural management, training, emerging economies

INTRODUCTION

The need for multinational companies (MNCs) to compete in an increasingly competitive global market has led to the growing importance of international assignments (Rumelt 1994). Increasingly, MNCs have started recognising that their expatriates (people who work and live abroad for short- or long-term assignments) are the major contributors to their development globally (Van Emmerik & Euwema 2008). The present study looked at a special type of international assignment, namely information technology (IT) professionals from Indian IT MNCs sent to work ‘onsite’ (where the customer was located) for a long- or short-term assignment. In this paper, the researcher extends the expatriate preparation literature to include preparation of Indian IT workers sent on international assignments to a Western country. This study explored the influence that organisational pre-departure cross-cultural training and time to prepare had on expatriates’ expectations prior to the assignment and on their initial adjustment. First, the issues relating to the time to prepare prior to the assignment and the preparation provided to the IT expatriates are outlined followed by their impact on the initial adjustment experiences of the expatriates. Interview data from the IT expatriates reveals whether the preparation provided by their employers impacted on the issues they experienced in Australia and reveals their perceptions of whether better preparation would have helped in their initial adjustment.
experiences. To this end, this research serves a valuable purpose in: broadening the existing literature base, which focuses largely on North America and makes scant reference to Indian IT expatriates.

**Indian IT MNCs and IT workers**

Many IT workers are frequently sent on ‘onsite’ assignments, which are considered to be a requisite of IT work (Upadhya 2009). The IT expatriates sent to client sites are crucial to their organisations, as they represent their employers. As well as the strategic importance of having IT workers onsite for international assignments, there are enormous costs involved. Sending an IT expatriate onsite can cost a MNC approximately four to five times more than if the work was conducted in India (Vallabh, Mishra & Bhatia 2008). The turnover rate, which among the IT sector staff is close to 30% (Damien, Kok-Yee, Christine & Soon 2007), is significantly high and very expensive. This turnover of IT expatriates delays the client project, reduces quality and increases costs (Jiang & Klein 2002), which would have a considerable impact on the Indian IT corporations, due to their competition with the large global MNCs.

The research on Indian IT professionals suggests that IT expatriates do experience issues in regards to communication, social networks and racial discrimination (Lakha 2005, Mathew & Ogbonna 2009, Meijering & van Hoven 2003, Paul & Anantharaman 2004, Upadhya 2009, Upadhya & Vasavi 2006, Xiang 2001). However, there is a lack of studies looking at the organisational preparation of Indian IT expatriates from the perspective of employees sent to work on client projects in developed countries, ensuring they adjust to the host country and, in turn, ensuring success of the project. Further, although there have been a few studies conducted on the human resource management issues in India (Budhwar, Luthar & Bhatnagar 2006, Sparrow & Budhwar 1997), what has so far been largely absent is analysis from the employee perspective of preparation and training provided to them by their Indian IT MNCs when they go on international projects.

**Preparation**

Research has indicated the importance of cross-cultural adaptation of expatriates and their families for the success of an international assignment (Forster 2000, Hutchings 2003). For an expatriate to successfully adjust on an international assignment, research suggests that acculturation and adaptation
(Ward & Rana-Deuba 1999), together with the need to gain an understanding of the host country culture (Osland & Bird 2000), is of critical importance. The need to develop cross-cultural skills is even greater where the gap between cultures is wide (Forster 2000). The effectiveness of cross-cultural training was further examined by Deshpande and Viswesvaran (1992), demonstrating a moderately strong correlation between cross-cultural training and performance and adjustability.

Black et al. (1991) argue that pre-departure training is important for expatriates, as it provides them with more accurate expectations of the assignment, which subsequently impacts on their overall adjustment.

Where a lack of accurate information is provided, the expatriate may stereotype the host culture in relation to their own experiences and perceptions of their own culture (Porter & Steers 1973). Pre-departure cross-cultural training can influence the initial adjustment by building accurate and realistic expectations of the assignment and the host country. Furthermore, there is extensive literature highlighting the importance of organisations’ preparation of their expatriates (Caligiuri 2000, Forster 2000, Osman-Gani 2000, Sargent & Matthews 1998). Researchers have highlighted the importance of cross-cultural training (Black et al. 1991, Deshpande & Viswesvaran 1992, Selmer, Torbiorn & De Leon 1998, Tung 1981, Zakaria 2000), as preparation can play a major role in contributing to expatriates' work and general adjustment. However, such literature focuses on Western multinationals sending expatriates to other developed or developing economies. There is a lack of research on expatriates from emerging economies going to work in developed countries.

Despite the high costs of sending expatriates overseas, a gap remains between individual training needs and the actual training offered by MNCs (Harris & Brewster 1999). The present study focused on preparing the IT expatriates sent to work on client projects in Australia, to ensure they had accurate expectations and their initial adjustment to the new environment was moderated. Figure 1 represents the proposed relationships between preparation of the expatriate and expectations and, dependent on the accuracy of the expectations, their impact on the initial adjustment experiences of the professionals (Black & Gregersen 1991, Black et al. 1991).

*Insert Figure 1 here*
METHODS

The present study utilised a qualitative exploratory approach, supported by research questions designed to address the gaps in the literature. To explore the phenomenon of initial adjustment and hearing in detail and complexity how the Indian IT expatriates describe and contextualise the preparation their organisation provides them and their perceptions of whether appropriate preparation could contribute to their initial adjustment in the host country (Eisenhardt 1989). The information was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with Indian IT expatriates in Australia in 2009. These expatriates were further classified in terms of their length of time on the assignment, divided into three sub-groups. The three sub-groups allowed the experiences to be compared and contrasted in relation to the different times at which the expatriates arrived, in order to provide a deeper insight into the perceptions of the three sub-groups. The three logical sub-groups, as seen in Figure 2, are categorised as: sub-group 1—expatriates on the assignment for up to nine months, who were in the early stages of their assignment; sub-group 2—expatriates who had been on the assignment for more than nine months but less than two years, who were in the adjustment phase of the assignment; and sub-group 3—expatriates who had been on the assignment for more than two years, considered as being in the stabilisation phase of the assignment, as identified by Nicholson (Nicholson).

Insert Figure 2 here

The study sought to go beyond what quantitative tools could offer by exploring the nature of the phenomenon itself, which is a particular advantage of qualitative work (Symon & Cassell 2006). The sample chosen for the study leant itself to examining the research phenomenon. The study employed a snowball sampling whereby the researcher contacted a small number of members within the target population and encouraged them to introduce her to others (Walliman 2006). Professionals from Indian IT MNCs were chosen for the study due to the importance of IT expatriates and their threat of turnover, especially when they are sent to work on client projects overseas (Budhwar, Varma, Singh & Dhar 2006, Krishnan & Singh 2010). In addition, most IT organisations are considering training their expatriates of vital importance.
The information was obtained through semi-structured interviews with 54 Indian IT professionals, aged between 25 and 40 years and working for five Indian IT MNCs, who were on international assignments in Australia (Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane) during 2009. Of the 54 participants only seven were females, rest all were males and 22 of 25 married expatriates had accompanying family with them. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the aid of a general guide, which allowed for probing during each interview (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). The five Indian IT MNCs that were chosen were among the medium to large Indian IT consulting and IT services companies, each with a turnover ranging from over 40 million to 1.5 billion dollars (US) and employing 10,000 to 50,000 employees. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions about assignment preparation in general, particularly focusing on the pre-departure cross-cultural training provided by MNCs to employees prior to relocation.

Data analysis

Following transcription of the audio-taped interviews, two phases of analysis took place: a content coding approach followed by a thematic approach (Miles & Huberman 1994). First, the data was divided into meaningful analytical units based on the wider literature. Initially, codes were assigned to the data and were then reviewed again to ensure that all appropriate responses were coded accurately (Neumann 2004). Frequency counts were conducted in order to provide a quantitative basis for making statements about the selection of the codes’ participant data and in relation to exploring the key themes (Witte & Witte 2004). NVivo (v. 8) computer software was used to develop and collate different themes and facilitate data management, which assisted in validating the research findings (Bazeley & Richards 2000). Overall, the meaningfulness of each theme was considered to be strengthened when more than one participant had discussed a theme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The central theme of initial adjustment helps to explain and relate all emergent categories (Strauss & Corbin 1998). It is argued here that the preparation of the expatriates precedes or co-exists with the initial adjustment processes, whereby initial adjustment to the host country is impacted by
preparation. The theoretical rather than statistical importance of the data within each category is emphasised (Miles & Huberman 1994). The IT expatriate participants are referred to by fictitious names, the sub-groups to which they belong and a code for the company assigned to them. The findings of the present study identified that the time to prepare for the assignment impacted on the preparation the IT expatriates received prior to the assignment, which had an impact on their expectations and initial adjustment in the new country. Accordingly, the present study explored the complexity of the factors that influenced expectations and initial adjustment prior to the assignment, as depicted in Figure 1.

**Time to prepare prior to the assignment**

Before commencing the assignment, the IT expatriate and his/her family are pre-occupied with tasks that have to be completed before the move. These include selling or renting their house and car, packing and saying their farewells, and in addition, brushing up on technical skills. Respondents in the present study felt that the industry was very customer centric due to which their parent organisations did not have a lot of control over when the professionals had to leave for the assignment; therefore, appropriate training and preparation was usually bypassed. This theme emerged as approximately 20% of the expatriates in the first and second groups said they had less than one week to prepare for the assignment, as compared to the last sub-group, in which almost 60% of the expatriates had less than one week to prepare for the assignment. This difference in the time given to the expatriates to prepare may be an indication that their Indian MNCs have started understanding the importance of providing more time to the expatriates to prepare and get training (see Table 1). Further, almost 15–17% of the first group, 25% of the second and 20% of the third group were given more than two weeks to prepare. As explained by an expatriate, this was because two years ago, visa application processing took only two weeks, but in recent years, it took three weeks or more, which meant the professional had that time to prepare.

*Insert Table 1 here*

A few expatriates pointed out that the MNCs apply for visas for a group of people in anticipation of a requirement from the client, so they have people ready to be sent for projects. Nonetheless, it was
affirmed that having a visa was not a guarantee of an assignment. Moreover, with the huge workload, professionals argued that they did not have the time to start preparing unless they knew they were going on the assignment. As a respondent in the first subgroup who had only three days notice to leave explained the impact of leaving in two days: ‘There is no other option, it took one month to get the visa but I was told I may have to go anytime but I wasn’t given a proper date, but only 2 to 3 days were given before I had to leave… It would have been better if we have little more time, so we could prepare better. We didn’t have time to do shopping, packing, locate place in Australia as we didn’t know when we were going. So we didn’t have any arrangements about accommodation, travel etc… There are trainings but I didn’t get a chance to attend that. There was no other preparation prior to leaving’ (Satish/I/A). Issues related to lack of time to prepare are further highlighted in this quote.

Clearly, the time between the notification of the assignment and the actual departure has a lot of bearing upon the preparation time available for each of the expatriates (Harris & Brewster 1999). The present study identified that in many instances, the IT professionals are not given enough prior notice about the commencement of an assignment, and this often results in limited time for them to talk with their families and to prepare themselves. While sufficient preparation and training will improve their ability to adjust and acculturate to the new country (Black & Mendenhall 1990, Harris & Brewster 1999), many do not have enough time to fulfil their pre-departure tasks, and this impacts negatively on their adjustment experience.

One of the main findings of this study is that the IT assignments are very client-focused and client-initiated. There is a pattern noted in the IT business model which is very dependent on the client contracts, whilst trying to over fulfil the expectations, lead to unrealistic expectations from the employees. Similar to studies within the Western context (Caligiuri et al. 2001), there is no particular focus on preparation of the expatriates for the new country; technical concerns seem more important. If there is a requirement by the client, then an available person with the required skill set is sent on the assignment. However, the main difference between the Indian IT organisations and Western companies is that the latter expatriates are going to their subsidiary office, where they have a support network. On the other hand, the Indian IT expatriates are going to a completely new
organisation, as consultants, where the client organisations expect them to perform and complete the work. The lack of a preparation and support network was therefore noted by most respondents as the main concerns.

**Pre-departure training**

The expatriates’ experiences of adjusting to Australia were all affected in some way by their preparation prior to the assignment, which, as pointed out by Black et al. (1991), impacted on their anticipatory adjustment prior to them going on the assignment. This theme covers mainly cross-cultural training and whether that prepared them for the differences in the new culture. It was assumed that most of the IT expatriates, being skilled professionals in their field, already had technical competence—some respondents affirmed that technical training is an ongoing process in most IT organisations.

*Insert Table 2 here*

Table 2 shows the pre-departure training received by professionals and whether or not it was relevant. It is evident that although many of the expatriates had pre-departure training, it was either of little or no help to them. Within the first sub-group, only 26% had no training, of which one fifth had previous international experience and thereby believed there was no need for training. Also, 8% had irrelevant training and about one third had little training, and only one sixth stated that their training was relevant and useful on their assignment. Importantly, the time when the expatriates received their training also impacted on their overall preparation. As noted by a few respondents, when they joined their organisation, they were provided with basic ‘soft-skill’ training, which entailed dining and other essential etiquettes. However, different countries have diverse cultures and work ethics for which the expatriates need to be trained—as noted earlier, the IT professionals are not necessarily being transferred to a subsidiary office and they thus have to adapt more rapidly to the change in organisational cultures.

One of the respondent managers stated that training was mandatory for every expatriate before they could obtain their ticket to travel overseas, especially if they were travelling for the first time; however, the relevance of the training was lacking. One of the expatriates spoke about the
relevance of training: ‘You do get trained ... how to react and how to behave ... They give you a
description of how to interact with the client … I think they could have done better, they give you all
the business side but how to cope there ... the climatic conditions here, you are not prepared. It was a
pretty bad experience for me outside work’ (Mihir/2/B). Lack of effective training impeded on the
expatriates outside work, which further impacted on their confidence. The importance of
comprehensive cultural training has been pointed out by many researchers (Black, Gregersen &

Lack of effective cross-cultural training programs added to the probability of poor
performance or even failure for some expatriates on assignment. One of the expatriates explained
about some difficulties faced due to lack of training: ‘The thing is, you don’t know whether you are
doing the right thing or the wrong thing unless you are shrewd enough to immediately understand
what the other people think. Generally, the Westerners don’t usually react immediately, they may be
so gentle and they may react in a different way, especially at the work places. So it is much better to
have the training in advance’ (Raj/1/C). As explained by the respondent, effective cross cultural
training is very significant for the Indian IT workers going to work at client site, especially due to the
nature of their work they need to comprehend the client requirements much earlier.

There is a pattern suggesting that the Indian IT MNCs are ensuring that their personnel are
prepared prior to leaving for the assignment by restricting assignments to those who have attended
training. However, due to time pressures, as pointed out by the respondents, the training sessions are
generic and focused on basic soft skills related to how they should behave rather than sensitising them
to the new country. Thus, the study identified that the respondents’ employers were making their
training programs mandatory but most of them were very basic. Notably, almost all of the expatriates
affirmed the importance of cross-cultural training in making their adjustment easier, although some of
them did feel that having previous experience made a difference to their initial adjustment. However,
most of the expatriates felt that appropriate training would have made it easier for them in the new
country. Training not only prepares them for the assignment, it also ensures they have realistic
expectations, which facilitates their initial adjustment in the new country.
Relationship between time to prepare and pre-departure training and its impact on expectations and initial adjustment

The time to prepare for the assignment and pre-departure training given to expatriates will impact on their perceptions and their expectations in relation to the assignment. Interestingly, most respondents mentioned that they had to start work the day after they arrived in Australia, making it even more difficult for them to adjust during the initial stage. In addition, adjustment conditions combined with inaccurate expectations of the assignment created further stress for the expatriates. Of the respondents, 21% spoke about the initial months being difficult and traumatic, as expectations were not being met. One respondent talked of his initial days: ‘[In the] initial stages it takes time to adjust to how to speak, how they communicate. It would have been better if the company could have prepared us or provide the spouse with some kind of training’ (Sanjay/I/A). As suggested by Sanjay it would have helped if his parent organization could provide them and their spouse’s better pre-departure training to ensure they do not make a blunder.

Some of the respondents said that they still had not been able to integrate into the local society. Some mentioned dealing only with the clients and not having the opportunity to interact with anyone outside of their worksite. On the other hand, the respondents who had received good training talked about how they felt little discomfort in the new environment, as they had been prepared for what to expect and how to contact people. The theory of met expectations suggests that if the expectations of an individual are congruent with the reality, it will make the individual’s adjustment in the new country easier (Porter & Steers 1973). Thus, a strong relationship was observed between the impact of preparation and expectations on the initial adjustment of the expatriates. It is therefore vital for expatriates to have realistic expectations about the conditions of the country of assignment and work, knowledge of the project and clients, and more importantly, about the social support available.

A female expatriate from the first sub-group who was given just over a week to prepare explained the difficulties of adjustment: ‘There was a bit of training but not exactly, the training I was given was from a document to read from it … I couldn’t be trained (due to lack of time) … I was a bit
nervous, since it was the first onsite trip but after coming here, I have put in a lot of effort … so that was the stress I had to work on. Plus, the new things, I had to work on the new culture, the new people, everything was new; so I would say the first initial one month was very difficult, I found the accent a problem, too … I would say if I had time, I would have been trained on that and it could have definitely helped. Instead of my putting more effort over here—all of a sudden, I was working in a stress situation that time.’ (Radha/1/B). As reiterated in this quote and the previous quotes that lack of time impacted on the pre-departure preparation on the IT expatriates which impacted on their initial adjustment. A consistent body of research has shown the need for MNCs to implement appropriate pre-departure training and preparation to maximise the benefits of expatriation.

The present study reinforces this view and argues that preparation of the IT expatriates prior to the assignment has a significant impact on how they mentally prepare for the assignment and also on the expectations they have of the new country to which they are going. If they are allowed more time, they can undertake the pre-departure training and familiarise themselves with various aspects of the country and culture, contact colleagues, and prepare themselves in advance for what they may encounter. The study has established that as the industry was client dependent, some IT companies were overpromising and the lack of appropriate planning resulted in limited time to prepare for the IT expatriates. The analysis appeared to provide unique information in addition to that of the preparation of expatriates by analysing IT expatriates sent on assignment at different times. In short, this integration represents an original contribution to the literature.

CONCLUSION AND ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Most empirical research examining the preparation process undertaken by employees prior to embarking on an overseas assignment has mainly focused on Western expatriates on an international assignment to a developing country. This research project contrasts previous studies, as it has looked at this situation in reverse. The research specifically focused on developing an understanding of the preparation processes of IT professionals from an emerging economy, India, who are sent to work in a developed country, Australia. There is a lack of studies on the impact of expatriation on IT workers
from emerging economies. The research found that within the MNCs studied, each provided a form of pre-departure training; however, except for a few respondents, most found it was either of little or no help to them. This caused a lot of stress and upset among the respondents, which impacted on their adjustment and subsequently on their overall work and decisions to stay with their organisation. The study found that appropriate pre-departure training for employees without previous international experience will result in a positive adjustment experience during the initial days on assignment with dealing with clients and confidence within and outside work.

Moreover as stated earlier the study noted lack of planning from some respondent employers was one of the major cause of lack of time. The study shows that though the industry is client dependent, there is a need for the IT companies to have more apposite planning by not making unrealistic promises to their clients and ensuring their expatriates have enough time to prepare prior to the assignment. The implications could be that the IT expatriates may not perform on the project or subsequently leave the organisation. This can cause delay of clients’ projects, reduction in quality and increased costs which could lead to loss of contracts and reputation for the IT MNCs, and is therefore a major issue for these companies (Upadhya 2009). The study thus reiterates the importance of pre-departure training of the IT workers prior to them going on an international assignment at client site.

The outcomes of this study have wider implications for IHRM and the Indian IT industry in areas concerning the preparation and training provided to the Indian IT expatriates embarking on an overseas assignment. As Indian IT MNCs broaden their horizons and move to different locations, IHRM has become of great importance to the management of expatriate employees, contributing to their organisational success abroad. This study therefore has contributed to the literature by examining the preparation IT professionals undertake prior to international assignment. A potential limitation of the present research stems from the use of self-reporting measures. This was mitigated by conducting interviews with IT expatriates who had arrived in Australia at different times and had therefore been on the assignment for different lengths of time. For comparative purposes, interviews with the parent IT organisations would be warranted. This research has provided a macro view of the Indian IT MNCs sending IT expatriates to Australia.
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Figure 1 IMPACT OF PRE-DEPARTURE PREPARATION ON INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENT ADJUSTMENT

Adapted from Black, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1991)
Figure 2 Sub-groups explained

- **Sub-group 1**: Expatriates on assignment for nine months or less
  - 23 participants

- **Sub-group 2**: Expatriates on assignment for ten months but less than two years
  - 20 participants

- **Sub-group 3**: Expatriates on assignment for two to four years
  - 11 participants

*Based on Nicholson’s 1987 phases of adjustment*
## Appendix 2

### Tables 1 and 2

### Table 1 Time to prepare for the assignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-group</th>
<th>Less than one week</th>
<th>One to two weeks</th>
<th>Two to three weeks</th>
<th>Three to four weeks</th>
<th>More than four weeks</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-group 1</td>
<td>30% (7)</td>
<td>22% (5)</td>
<td>13% (3)</td>
<td>17% (4)</td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-group 2</td>
<td>20% (4)</td>
<td>25% (5)</td>
<td>20% (4)</td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
<td>30% (6)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-group 3</td>
<td>55% (6)</td>
<td>18% (2)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18% (2)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32% (17)</td>
<td>22% (12)</td>
<td>15% (8)</td>
<td>9% (5)</td>
<td>22% (12)</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 Pre-departure training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-departure training</th>
<th>No training</th>
<th>Irrelevant training</th>
<th>Little relevant training</th>
<th>Good training</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-group 1</td>
<td>39% (9)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>35% (8)</td>
<td>17% (4)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-group 2</td>
<td>25% (5)</td>
<td>30% (6)</td>
<td>35% (7)</td>
<td>10% (2)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-group 3</td>
<td>27% (3)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>27% (3)</td>
<td>37% (4)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31% (17)</td>
<td>17% (9)</td>
<td>33% (18)</td>
<td>19% (10)</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
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