

WHY DO INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS FAIL? THE EXPATRIATE FAMILIES SPEAK

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Why Do International Assignments Fail?

The Expatriate Families Speak

Abstract: *Much has been said, and written, about failed international assignments, but few studies, if any, have explored the causes of failure from the perspective of the expatriates. In this article, we draw on a qualitative study of 64 expatriate families who self-identified as having prematurely returned from an international assignment. Our findings confirm prior research showing that family concerns is one cause of assignment failure, but that other reasons exist, primarily insufficient organizational support.*

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Failed international assignments are no small matter. Despite uncertainty as to the true rate of failure (Harzing 2002; Tung 1988), Brookfield (2012) consistently reports that between 4 and 6 per cent of all international assignments fail in any given year. Failed assignments are difficult to define, ranging from premature return, inability to achieve assignment objectives, sub-par on-assignment performance, host-country problems, or repatriation turnover (Cendant 2001; Thomas and Lazarova 2006). The costs of failed assignments typically include reduced performance by the business unit in which the failure occurs, disrupted relationships with host-country nationals, recruitment and replacement costs of personnel, revenue losses due to decreased productivity, declines in organizational morale in the host-location, and damage to a firm's reputation and brand, particularly in key emerging markets (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. 2005; Stroh 1995). Indeed, even one failed assignment can de-rail a company's strategy if an expatriate is sent to a key market in which much has been invested. But failed assignments can also affect expatriates' physical and mental well-being in terms of low self-esteem, loss of prestige and respect amongst colleagues, weakening of the psychological contract, family problems, loss of promotion opportunities, and career path damage (Guzzo, Noonan, and Elron 1994; Shaffer et al. 2006; Varner and Palmer 2002). Thus, failed assignments often produce a 'ripple effect' that can negatively impact an organization for years afterwards, including increased barriers to mobility and reduced willingness-to-expatriate among potential assignee candidates within the organization.

Theoretical framework

This study is based on a theoretical model proposed by Lazarova, Westman and Shaffer (2010) relating to expatriate work and family performance. This model integrates two existing theories.

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory posits that job performance is impacted by the extent to which (i) the demands that employees are exposed to and (ii) the resources which they have available to them, are balanced (Demerouti et al. 2001). The second component of the model incorporates theories regarding (i) the dynamic interplay between work and family through spillover effects between the employee's work and family roles (Crouter 1984) and (ii) crossover effects between the employee and partner (Westman 2001).

This model was proposed for the expatriation context because its characteristics include (i) expatriates facing the challenges of a new work context, (ii) changing family dynamics as partners face new tasks and expectations (often simultaneously with career change or job loss) and (iii) organizations assuming more responsibility for the expatriate's family compared to domestic employees. Thus demands increase for expatriates and employers increase the resources available to them such as compensation, training and other support. We hypothesize that an imbalance between these demands and resources may be related to assignment failure.

In this article, we report the findings of a qualitative study on the causes of expatriate failure from the perspective of families who self-identified as having prematurely returned from an international assignment. Although assignment failure has been defined in multiple ways, some of which has been criticized (e.g. Forster 1997; Yuen 2003), in this study we define failure as the premature return of all members of an expatriate family to the nominated home-country ('premature return'). It has been the most consistent definition of assignment failure for the past decade (cf. Brookfield 2012) and it allows us to draw comparisons. We contribute to the literature on assignment failure (cf. Black and Stephens 1989; Hays 1974; Shaffer and Harrison 1998) by obtaining data from expatriate families, given that prior studies about the causes of assignment failure have explored only the perspectives of the organization and not the assignee (e.g. Harzing and Christensen 2004). The perspective of families is important because data

provided by HR and global mobility managers may not be truly reflective of the actual causes of failure, as they may be unaware if a policy is being implemented sufficiently well through outsourced third-party vendors or whether the policy provisions are actually effective (Lazarova and Pascoe 2013). Specifically, we explore (a) the causes of failed assignments; and, (b) whether expatriates provide accurate reasons for assignment failure to their employers.

Causes of failed assignments

The reasons for failed assignments are many, constituting of four distinct categories: job and work environment factors, family factors, organizational support, and contextual factors in the host-country. The first category relates to resources provided to the expatriate relating to the work context (JD-R theory). The second category is focused primarily on characteristics of the expatriate's partner (spillover effects). The third category refers to a variety of resources provided by the organization to the expatriate and family (full model). The fourth category involves increased demands (JD-R theory). The four categories are further described below.

Job and work environment factors

These factors contribute to assignment failure in relation to role clarity, role conflict, and role novelty as predictors of adjustment, job satisfaction, performance outcomes, and turnover intentions (Hays 1974), particularly in relation to expatriates' compensation, career development and promotion opportunities (Stahl et al. 2009). McNulty, De Cieri and Hutchings (2013) found that a lack of attention to career path development resulted in expatriates seeking external job opportunities during an international assignment in anticipation of poor repatriation and/or career development outcomes. Van der Heijden, van Engen, and Paauwe (2009) concluded that career support is valued more for the recognition or attention the organization demonstrates to

expatriates than the actual career changes, opportunities and development programs derived from it. Selection can also be critical: while technical skill for expatriates is important, social and perceptual abilities, personality, strong reasoning, and intercultural intelligence are just as necessary (Caligiuri 2000). In fact, Mercer found in its *2011 Worldwide Survey of International Assignment Policies and Practices* that 62 per cent of companies rate 'poor candidate selection' as a major cause of assignment failure. The problem is that a lack of 'best fit' between strategic intent, assignment purpose, and expatriates' skills and abilities (e.g. language expertise relevant to assignment location, relational abilities, and spouse and family considerations) is likely to result in an assignment not achieving its stated objectives.

Family factors

These factors have been recognized as the major cause of assignment failure for at least the past two decades (Brookfield 2012; Cartus and Primacy 2010). Recent research (e.g. Andreason 2008; Lee 2007) reports that family concerns, partner dissatisfaction, and inability of spouse to adapt are all causes of assignment failure, with spouse adjustment emerging as a critical factor in overall international assignment success (Shaffer and Harrison 1998; Yuen 2003). McNulty (2012) found that trailing spouse adjustment is multidimensional and socially constructed; conflicts between identity and career issues are major psychological challenges and if not addressed, can lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness, resentment, depression, and marital stress. Work-family crossover effects have been shown to impact on expatriates' job performance, increasing intent to leave (Caligiuri, Hyland, and Joshi 1998; Takeuchi, Yun and Tesluk 2002). Dual-career issues for the trailing spouse can create further stress (Harvey 1997).

Organizational support

The types of *organizational support* provided to expatriate families consists predominantly of practical support in areas such as pre-assignment visits to the host location, furniture storage, tax advice, interim accommodation, home-sale assistance, language courses, cross-cultural training and immigration paperwork (ORC Worldwide 2008). But whilst companies generally give considerable attention to the logistics of an international relocation, much less attention is given to the professional and social skills necessary for expatriate families to adjust in their new location (McNulty 2012). Such support includes job search assistance, career counseling, resume preparation, work permit assistance, and retraining/tuition reimbursement, as well as introductions to other expatriates, memberships in sports and social clubs, and information about and access to expatriate forums and spouse networking groups. Thus, while organizational support can assist in assignment success, its absence can have the opposite effect: poor support sends strong signals to employees and their families about the extent to which an organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being, which, in turn, can predict employee commitment and retention (Guzzo, Noonan, and Elron 1994; McNulty 2012).

Contextual factors in the host-country

Lastly, *contextual factors in the host-country* play an important role in assignment success in areas such as cultural adjustment in terms of language, customs, values, and lifestyle (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. 2005). Aumann (2007) found that an expatriate's home country culture had a moderating effect on the relationship between person-organization value congruence and perceived overall fit. This suggests that individuals from different types of cultures apply different weighting schemes when forming perceptions of overall fit. Indeed, broad cultural values may be more universally important for an expatriate's perceived fit than more narrowly-defined work-related value dimensions. Thus, incongruence on cultural dimensions is a

contributing factor to expatriate failure as expatriates' perceived overall fit is significantly related to both increased job satisfaction and decreased turnover intentions.

All of the above causes of assignment failure point to the critical role of *psychological contract fulfilment* for expatriates and their families. Despite their non-employee status, spouses and partners of expatriates nonetheless have strong expectations as to the promises and obligations made to them by sponsoring organizations during international assignments. Prior research has consistently found poor fulfilment and/or contract violation can have a negative impact on employee attitudes and behaviors (Turnley and Feldman 1999a). Because the psychological contract is implicit and unspecified (Cullinane and Dundon 2006), Yan, Zhu and Hall (2002, 377) assert that “contract incompleteness often surrounds the relational aspects of expatriation, particularly as it pertains to the workers' family life”. Thus, for expatriates, unmet expectations can result in reduced organizational commitment, increased intent to leave, and higher actual turnover (Guzzo, Noonan, and Elron 1994; Haslberger and Brewster 2009; Turnley and Feldman 1999b).

Method

Our unit of enquiry for the study was expatriate families (employed expatriates and their spouse/partner) that had experienced “early return”. A website data collection approach was used (see McNulty 2012), with a snowball method of sampling applied by posting invitations on social networking and other websites inviting potential participants to access and complete an online questionnaire via a designated link to the research website. Personal contacts of the authors in the cross-cultural training and relocation consulting businesses were also contacted and requested to extend an invitation to participate to clients who had experienced failed assignments. This snowball method resulted in a sample size of 64 participants from 64 separate

expatriate families. The online questionnaire was available on the first author's website for eight months (March to October 2010).

Using published research and reports as a guide, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed to explore the reasons for assignment failure. Open-ended questions were included to capture additional reasons not yet uncovered in prior research. Questions included (a) issues that eventually led to early return home, (b) whether the participants' family had provided the real reason for their return home to the company, and, (c) demographic information.

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo8, a qualitative analysis software program. Data provided by participants were classified into the four categories of organizational support, family issues, job/work environment, and contextual factors. The data were then sub-classified within each category by each of the authors. In order to ensure interrater reliability, classification differences were discussed and resolved.

Findings

Our findings show that the significance of organizational support was unequivocal: 37 per cent indicated that it was lacking in some critical way, constituting the most frequent cause of assignment failure. Furthermore, while 70 per cent of the participants said that they provided the true reason for assignment failure, a sizeable minority of 27 per cent did not (three per cent did not reply). A full listing of our results is shown in Table 1.

[insert Table 1 about here]

The most common reason reported for assignment failure was insufficient organizational support during the assignment in areas such as inadequate or inflexible assignment policies, insufficient preparation and settling-in support, poor dual-career support, inadequate company communication, and repatriation issues. Consistent with prior research (e.g. McNulty 2012; ORC

Worldwide 2008; Permits Foundation 2009; van der Heijden, van Engen, and Paauwe 2009), these problems point to inconsistencies between expatriates' expectations and the realities they experienced, particularly in relation to cross-cultural and other assignment support. As one respondent explained, "we just assumed the company would be invested enough in the outcome of the assignment to ensure a smooth entry for our family. In the absence of their support, we floundered."

Family issues were cited as the second most frequent cause of assignment failure. Critical issues include marital problems, mental health issues, homesickness, family medical crises (e.g. diagnoses of autism in children), and children's difficulties at school (bullying) as well as with locals. More serious family issues included alcoholism, domestic violence (where one spouse indicated, "my husband turned physically abusive and broke my shoulder in two places"), and suicidal tendencies arising from post-traumatic stress disorder.

In terms of the job/work environment, which was identified as the third most frequent cause of assignment failure, participants indicated that poor interaction with local employees, too many extended business trips during an assignment leading to excessive family separation, differences in cultural norms between home and host-countries, ethical issues in foreign subsidiary offices, and lack of career management support were some of the reasons contributing to their premature return to the home country. The most important cause of failure arising out of the job/work environment, however, was the employee leaving to join another company, sometimes as a result of job loss/retrenchment.

Contextual factors in the host country was the least common cause of assignment failure, but when it did create problems these arose predominantly with cultural differences, as well as safety and security issues particularly for female family members and children.

With respect to the accuracy of the reasons for premature return provided to the company, we found that a substantial minority of almost 30 per cent of the participating families did not provide accurate reasons.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the most common reason for assignment failure from the perspective of the families involved is insufficient organizational support during the assignment. Importantly, this finding debunks the widely held view that ‘family issues’ is *the* primary cause of assignment failure (cf. Cartus and Primacy 2010; KPMG 2011), a result that has likely arisen from survey data gained only from the perspective of MNCs who would be less inclined to criticize their own policies and practices. Mirroring other findings (e.g. McNulty 2012), a lack of effective organizational support is a heretofore under-reported cause of premature return leading to assignment failure.

Additionally, these results clearly indicate that inconsistencies between expatriates’ expectations regarding company support and the realities they experienced, particularly in relation to cross-cultural support, are a critical factor in assignment failure. Thus the psychological contract is perceived to have been broken. This result suggests that the concept of a “realistic job preview” may be even more critical in the selection of expatriate employees than when hiring for domestic positions. Further, this result lends support to our hypothesis that the demands on expatriates are not matched by the resources they are provided, and that this imbalance results in assignment failure.

However, family issues are still an important factor in assignment failure, as they were cited as the second most frequent cause.. The results regarding the significant role of family issues in assignment failure confirm the findings of other researchers (e.g. Brookfield 2012; Cole and

McNulty 2012; Ernst & Young 2010; Lazarova, Westman, and Shaffer 2010; Pascoe 2003). In addition, our data make a further contribution by providing a rare level of detail directly from the families as to the specific issues that warrant attention. It appears that spillover of partner issues to the expatriate is a significant factor in assignment failure.

Job/work environment, which was identified as the third most frequent cause of assignment failure, is a factor over which employers have control. Thus it may be prudent for employers to address some of the issues identified by participants, such as an excessive number of business trips, and stronger career planning. Again, it appears that perceived psychological contract violation may explain job factors such as career planning issues, and that spillover and crossover effects may be created by excessive business travel. The finding that the most important cause of failure arising out of the job/work environment was the employee leaving to join another company is consistent with Brookfield (2012), who reported that the major cause of assignment failure among 123 MNCs was the loss of employees to join competitors. Future research is required to investigate whether demand-resource imbalance at the current employer and the promise of more resources from the new employer is part of the reason for leaving.

The finding that contextual factors in the host country were the least common cause of assignment failure is consistent with previous results. . Gedro (2010) found similar results in her study of expatriate lesbians, as did McNulty (2013) in her exploratory study of female expatriate breadwinner families, suggesting that personal security can be a concern for gender and other minorities (i.e. women and children) in expatriate communities. These additional demands outside of the day-to-day work environment appear to be unmatched by additional resources and thus this result also lends support to the hypothesis.

The result indicating that a substantial minority of almost 30 per cent of the participating families did not provide accurate reasons for assignment failure requires further research.

Specifically, more investigation is required to assess whether those that were *not* honest with their companies did so because of personal problems at work or sensitive family matters that were too severe or embarrassing to reveal; how communication of these issues could be improved between expatriates and their companies; and the types of ‘proxy’ reasons that were provided by expatriates to explain their premature return and whether these were believed by their employing organizations.

This study has several limitations. We restricted our exploration only to the reasons for failed assignments from the perspective of families. Future research is necessary to examine the short and long-term impact of failed assignments on families upon return to their home country. The sample size was modest and further studies will be required before these initial results can be considered generalizable. An expanded methodology including interviews would provide even richer data for more in-depth analysis as well ideas as to where additional organizational support would be most effective in reducing premature returns. Furthermore, the growing incidence of “split families” to counteract direct assignment failure (defined as those where an expatriate is not accompanied by his/her family members, who remain in or return to the home country or a nominated third country) requires further study, as split families do not solve the deeper causes related to premature return, and indeed may create more longer-term problems for expatriates and their families leading to possibly more serious assignment failure outcomes (Brookfield 2012).

Overall, this study has contributed to the academic literature on the reasons for assignment failure. The theoretical model proposed by Lazarova, Westman and Shaffer (2010) was supported by the results. Input from the perspective of the families experiencing failed assignments has expanded our knowledge of this phenomenon beyond that provided by managers responding to industry surveys and strengthened the case for greater attention to these

issues. A further contribution is the elaboration of the causes of failure beyond the broad categorizations of, for example, 'family issues' and 'organizational support' to provide more specific details that can be further explored.

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Table 1
Causes of Assignment Failure from Expatriate Families' Point of View

Cause of Failure	Frequency		Sample Quotes
	n	%	
<i>Organizational Support</i>	53	37	
Cross-Cultural and Other Assignment Preparation	24		When we arrived in France, I was shocked at how completely my husband's company abandoned us...we were left to fend for ourselves with regards to tradespeople, banking and the local government.
International Assignment Policy and Benefits	8		[There was] constant conflict over travel and housing policies, and the inequities with which those policies were applied.
Dual-Career Issue	4		I approached my husband to end the assignment and come back to the US (we were located in London) ...I felt that my skills... were not being utilized.
Language Training and Preparation	6		The primary issue for me (the spouse) was the isolation directly attributable to my lack of French fluency. The expat community in this town was tiny, so without an excellent grasp of the language, it was extremely hard to fit in to society as a whole.
Company Communication	4		The company did a horrible job with the communication that [my husband] was being transferred.
Medical Care	3		I developed mental health issues associated with PTSD that no medical professional would acknowledge, insisting 'it can't be that hard being here' ...shut up, we'll tell you what your 'real' problem is...I became suicidal.
Repatriation Support	3		The company would not include an employment guarantee upon our return (for any of the six persons expatriated)... eventually all six of the expatriates returned early.
Housing	1		The lack of care and concern about our personal circumstances started the assignment off on a horrible foot - we were living in and out of hotels for 3 months because we could not secure a lease on an apartment.
<i>Family Issues</i>	44	31	
Marital Problems	13		[My husband] informed me that we were no longer married and that I was fat and ugly. My husband moved out of our townhouse and leased another apartment... we have three boys ... he had no contact with the boys after he moved out.
Mental Health Issues	9		My husband is an alcoholic and seemed to drink more while in China.
Children's Difficulty in Adjusting	9		Bullying starts at the end of the laneway on the school bus and lasts all day long, right into the classroom where teachers bully.
Unexpected Crises	7		Our family returned to Sydney 'early' when our daughter was diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. [Country] has a lot of positive things going for it, but an enlightened approach toward ASD is not one of them.
Spouses' Difficulty in	5		Huge issues with cultural differences here. The mindset/lens of this society, its social culture, the racial profiling of us

Adjusting			here with its expectations of us are far harsher than we ever experienced as expats [before].
Homesickness	1		Continuing to live so far from our remaining elderly parents was short-changing both us and them.
Job/work Environment	36	25	
Resignation/Job Loss	13		My husband quit a job in the UAE as the company kept sending him to work overseas (ie. not in the UAE where I and our son were living) for extended periods. The company reorganized and his job was eliminated. [My husband] has accepted a job offer with his old company and we are looking forward...to working for a company where they treat their employees well.
Interaction with Local Employees	6		“I was very pissed off and frustrated because I could not establish myself with the local team.” “The people he works with don’t talk to each other...sit behind their computer all day and say nothing. He feels like he has to initiate all conversation.”
Organizational Culture	8		“I often felt as though no one “heard” me at work – but I don’t think this was a cultural thing so much as it was a ‘a giant corporation managed mostly by men’ thing” “Once we arrived, we realized that the work culture in the US is very different than in Europe. The balance between work and family life is out of balance.”
Career Development	3		Career advancement and earnings prospects ...had not materialized as we had been led to believe they would.
Subsidiary Ethical Issues	1		I quit because the ...company was asking me to cut corners and ‘pull fast ones’ ...eventually, the ...company asked me to bribe.
Job Role	5		There was a 3 week period when [my husband] had no official job...they finally found a spot for him, but it’s doing a totally different job than what he was initially told – and something that he doesn’t like doing. The owner ... told me ...that I had done the job exactly as he had wanted but due to local politics he had decided that a local should run the company. I left the company that day ... and I returned home to the UK.
Contextual Factors in Host-Country	10	7	
Security Issues	6		The security and safety situation in our host country had steadily deteriorated since our arrival...we did not have any confidence in the plans my husband’s employer had to address our concerns...we felt virtual prisoners in our home and targets when we went out.
Cultural Differences	4		With the lackadaisical attitude about work in the Caribbean, it was sometimes difficult to get things done.
	N=143		