

The Expatriate Experience in Dubai: Goal Fulfillment as a Measure of Success

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Individuals considering expatriate opportunities must examine a number of variables before deciding to relocate. The inability to adjust to the new environment contributes to expatriate failure and comes at significant cost to employer and employee. Variables contributing to success include selection, training, personality, cultural distance, and family adjustment. This study examined factors that influenced goal fulfillment for expatriates in Dubai. Self-preparation, social interaction, relationships, diversity, personality traits, and the desire to learn enhanced adjustment and goal achievement. Selection for expatriate assignments should focus on determining a match between the assignment and employee goals as well as identifying appropriate personality traits.

INTRODUCTION

Motivation for living abroad as an expatriate may vary widely. Reasons for relocating one's self and one's family for an extended period of time may be for career advancement (Doherty, Dickman, & Mills, 2011), intercultural learning, or financial benefit. In other cases, expatriates may be serving as volunteers and be altruistically motivated. Expected outcomes of sponsoring companies may differ from those of the individuals they hire. Assignments to desirable locations may be motivated by employers wanting to reward a stellar employee while those to less desirable locations may be due to the desire to remove mediocre employees from home base (Black & Gregersen, 1999).

Those considering expatriate opportunities must examine a number of variables before deciding to relocate. They must determine effect on families, both those who accompany them and those who stay at home, financial consequences, health care, safety, children's education, quality of life, type of work, fitness for the work, and short- and long-term career impact. Employer support can help ameliorate some of these issues. Indeed, the top-ranked employer services for expatriates are relocation, settling in, medical, paid advance visit to location, schools, and consultation concerning finances and taxes (Cigna, 2013).

A major line of inquiry about the expatriate experience are outcomes. Corporations make considerable investments in relocating individuals and their families, and in many cases, provide generous salary and benefits packages (e.g., a top middle manager package averages \$375,000; Harjani, 2015). Failure to adjust may result in low performance and returning home early (Harzing & Christensen, 2004),

and impact the corporation's ability to achieve its goals to develop international business ventures (Wang & Tran, 2012). When expatriates fail to make a successful transition, direct costs such as salary, training, travel, and relocation, as well as indirect costs, including damaged host country relations and failure to achieve business goals, are incurred (Shen, 2005). Thus, it is in the best interest of employers to ensure that expatriates adjust quickly and completely (Haslberger, Brewster, & Hippler, 2013).

The Middle East is an attractive location for expatriates with its high standard of living, generous salary and benefits packages, and lifestyle. The Middle East, North Africa, and Greater Arabia account for the largest percentage of all expatriate assignments at 23% (Cigna, 2013). The industry with the largest percentage of expatriates is energy, mining, and utilities at 20% followed by business services (construction and engineering) and technology, both at 12% (Cigna, 2013). However, expatriates in the Middle East and North Africa experience more dissatisfaction than those in any other area of the world regarding cultural training, impact on the family, and health benefits (Cigna, 2013).

Dubai, in particular, hosts a large number of expatriates due to extensive job opportunities, making it an interesting context for this study. Of the total population of 9.2 million, 7.8 million are expatriates and 1.4 million are Emirati Nationals (guide2dubai, 2016). Expatriates from Western countries comprise 8% of the population with those from Southeast Asia at 58% (guide2dubai, 2016). Dubai hosts 40,000 Americans, 40,000 Canadians, and 240,000 UK expatriates (guide2duabi, 2016).

Those who embrace the expat life may have very different reasons for doing so. Their experiences may also differ depending on personal characteristics, preparation, and context. The problem this study seeks to address is how to minimize negative expatriate experiences for employers, individuals, and families by understanding the goals of expatriates and the factors that impact goal fulfillment. Although research on the expatriate experience is extensive, the role of goals has yet to be addressed. Determining a match between employee and employer goals would appear to be a critical part of the selection process. Additionally, the impact of variables known to impact expatriate adjustment differs depending on context. This study seeks to explore the specific context of Dubai to expand current understanding. This is particularly important given the large numbers of employees being sent to the Middle East from all over the world. The research questions are as follows:

1. What were the expatriates' professional and personal goals?
2. What factors led to their feelings of success or lack of success in fulfilling their goals?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has explored various aspects that impact expatriate life such as selection (Black & Gregersen, 1999); training (Kataria & Sethi, 2013; Min, Magnini, & Singal, 2013; Morris, Savani, Mor, & Cho, 2014; Pradhan, Jena, & Panigrahy, 2016; Wang & Tran, 2012); language ability (Pradhan et al., 2016; Wan & Trang, 2012; Zhang & Harzing, 2016); stress (Nikolaou & Tasaousis, 2002; Sharma, 2007); and spouse adjustment (Ali, Van der Zee, & Sanders, 2003; Black & Gregersen, 1991; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Indeed, the inability to adjust to the host country culture is a primary cause of expatriate failure (Dowling & Welch, 2005).

Adjustment entails a number of variables, which have been categorized as situational (cultural distance, family adjustment, workplace support), and personal (emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence) (Morris et al., 2014). As expected, greater cultural distance negatively impacts adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Van Vianen, De Pater, Kristof-Brown, & Johnson, 2004) while training, spousal transition, host-country support (Black & Stephens, 1989; Black & Gregersen, 1991; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001), and organizational and managerial support aid it (Kraimer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001). As no studies have specifically examined expatriate goals, the literature review is broadened to explore adjustment factors and how these might impact goals and feelings of success.

Selection

Appropriate selection of employees for expatriate assignments is a critical factor for employers and employees to achieve their goals. For the employer, selection should be focused on achieving a specific

business goal, acquiring needed knowledge, and developing global leadership skills (Black & Gregersen, 1999). Employers need to consider the technical skills of employees, their anticipated comfort in living abroad (Black & Gregersen, 1999), and the personal characteristics of employee and spouse (Kataria & Sethi, 2013). Other factors include employee ability to persist in communicating effectively despite failures, willingness to establish a range of friends and associates, desire to learn about and experiment with local culture, understanding of and respect for others' cultural values, and a collaborative negotiation style (Black & Gregersen, 1999).

Companies use a range of techniques for selection, including observing the employee on international trips and in international contexts at home, the results of survey instruments, face-to-face interviews, short-term field experiences, and previous successful international experience (Black & Gregersen, 1999; Kataria & Sethi, 2013). Employees need an understanding of why they have been selected and expectations for what they are to achieve (Black & Gregersen, 1999; Kataria & Sethi, 2013). Although limited research is available on this topic, ideally, the personal and career goals of the expatriate should be compatible with those of the sponsoring company. While career advancement motivates many, in the case of Korean expatriates, company loyalty is a primary motivator in accepting expatriate assignments (Cho, Hutchings, & Marchant, 2013).

Preparation and Training

After selection, training should be available to aid the adjustment of employees and their dependents (Aswatthapa & Sadhna, 2013; Avril & Magnini, 2007; Kataria & Sethi, 2013; Magnini & Honeycutt, 2003; Pradhan et al., 2016; Tung, 1987; Wang & Tran, 2012) to achieve desired outcomes from the foreign assignment. Indeed, two-thirds of employers provide language and cultural training and more than half provide repatriation training (Cigna, 2013). Multinational corporations, such as HSBC, have extensive data from former and current expatriates about life in countries across the globe as well as helpful guides for various aspects of expat life, such as finance, local economies, careers, and moving logistics (HSBC, n. d.). Other organizations provide insights about the expatriate experience such as country rankings, quality of life, settling in, working abroad, and family life (InterNations, 2017).

Pre-departure programs typically consist of practical information about daily life and culture for employees and family members (Kataria & Sethi, 2013; Min et al., 2015) while on-arrival programs may be delivered by host country company representatives (Magnini & Honeycutt, 2003; Pradhan et al., 2016; Yavas & Bodur, 1999) and focus on real-life cultural scenarios, advice, and coaching (Min et al., 2015; Pradhan et al., 2016). Those who hire expatriates may outsource training to firms who specialize in this service (Black & Gregersen, 1999). When expatriates view the organization's investment in training to have exceeded that typically provided in other contexts, they experience positive general and work adjustment (Min et al., 2013).

Employees may be unaware of the training and services their companies provide (Cigna, 2013), or training may not occur at all (Black & Gregersen, 1999; Saks & Belcourt, 2006). Reasons for not offering training include manager assumptions that business is similar throughout the world, that differences do not warrant the cost of training, or that those benefiting from the perks of expat life do not need support when returning home (Black & Gregersen, 1999). Assuming that "people are the same globally" is one of the "biggest mistakes expatriate managers can make" (Kataria & Sethi, 2013, p. 6). In some cases, training has been shown to not impact adjustment (Hu, Martin, & Yeh, 2002; Puck, Kittler, & Wright, 2008); however, adjustment is critical to performance (Harrison & Shaffer, 2005; Hechanova, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2003; Ozdemir & Cizel, 2007), and the general consensus is that training aids adjustment.

The most effective training may focus on how to learn, and thus, how to gain needed knowledge about new cultural environments. This might include technology-based strategies such as reviewing websites or using intranets and company databases (Cho et al., 2013; Morris et al., 2014). Technology may also lessen the need for repatriation training as expatriates are able to use it to communicate regularly with those at home throughout their assignment (Cho et al., 2013). Additionally, strategies such as consulting expatriates rather than locals, as the latter may not be cognizant of their own cultural patterns, obtaining background information about colleagues or superiors before meetings, and making

observations in the new work environment are effective, and might entail checklists with items to consider (e.g., meeting place, dress, topics of conversation) accompanied by constant checking to test assumptions and generalizations (Morris et al., 2014). Training that involves expanding one's awareness of cultural assumptions and using cultural knowledge as a lens (Morris et al., 2014) while accounting for individual differences, is likely more effective in a range of situations and cultures, than providing general rules of behaviors.

Personality Traits

Personality traits positively impact adjustment and performance in expected and positive ways: extraversion (Caligiuri, 2000; Mol, Born, Willemsen, & Van der Molen, 2005; Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006) openness to experience (Ali, Van der Zee, & Sanders, 2003; Lievens, Harris, Van Keer, & Bisqueret, 2003; Shaffer et al., 2006), agreeableness (Caligiuri, 2000; Dalton & Wilson, 2000; Mol et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006), conscientiousness (Caligiuri, 2000; Dalton & Wilson, 2000; Mol et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006), and emotional stability (Ali et al., 2003; Mol et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006). These traits reflect behaviors positively related to social interaction, curiosity, comfort with ambiguity, flexibility, relationship building, feelings of competence, and the ability to manage the unfamiliar.

Although few studies have explored the role of emotional intelligence (EI) on adjustment, those that have show a positive impact (Lii & Wong, 2008; Ward, Fischer, Lam, & Hall, 2009). EI is the ability to perceive and understand one's own emotions and those of others and adjust one's emotions appropriately (Geddes & Callister, 2007; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Salovey & Grewal, 2005). Outcomes for those who possess emotional intelligence include a propensity for leadership (Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005), and correlation to various leadership styles, including transformational leadership (Duckett & Macfarlane, 2003; Hartsfield, 2003; Leban & Zulaub, 2004; Palmer, Walls, Burgess, & Con, 2001). Those who possess EI are viewed as effective managers (Kerr, Garvin, Heaton, & Boyle, 2006; Shipper, Kincaid, Rotondo, & Hoffman, 2003), and demonstrate a range of positive performance outcomes (e.g., rank, merit increases, sales) (Chipain, 2003; Langhorn, 2004; Lopes, Grewel, Kadis, Gall, & Salovey, 2006).

Most relevant to expatriate life are outcomes associated with coping, stress management, well-being, and conflict management. EI is negatively associated with stress (Nikolaou & Tasaousis, 2002), and positively associated with coping and stress management (Sharma, 2007), well-being in the face of work-family conflict (Lenaghan, Buda, & Eisner, 2007), the ability to manage work-family conflicts (Carmeli, 2003), and career commitment and job satisfaction (Carmeli, 2003). It is also associated with problem-solving (Rahim, 2002), collaborative conflict resolution (Malek, 2000), lower levels of workplace conflict, and a predisposition to innovate (Suliman & Shaikh, 2007).

Given that expatriate situations entail a cross-cultural workforce, greater likelihood for conflict in the workplace and within the family, and the ability to adapt to change, EI may be a critical attribute to success. It has been associated with cultural adjustment and success for managers on global assignments (Gabel, Dolan, & Cerdin, 2005). Accordingly, emotional intelligence theory may be a lens through which to view expatriate experiences.

Person-Environment Fit

Another lens through which to view adjustment is person-environment fit. This entails the ability of the individual to meet the demands of the environment and the environment having the necessary resources to fit the needs of the individual (Haslberger, Brewster, & Hippler, 2013). When expatriates "realize that they cannot . . . fully meet the demands raised by the move to another country, or that aspects of the move do not meet expectations" (Haslberger et al., 2013, p. 336), this prompts change. Failure to change may result in crisis, or culture shock, and require new resources or capabilities; this process of adjustment is on-going and impacted by the degree of willingness of the expatriate to change, which is partly determined by values (Haslberger et al., 2013).

Adjustment involves cognition, feeling, and behavior and is impacted by expatriates' internal standards (e.g., determination if they should maintain a distance or adapt as much as possible) as well as

by external standards represented by host society feedback on their behavior (Haslberger et al., 2013). Positive adjustment results in satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance, and reduces turnover and assignment withdrawal (Haslberger et al., 2013).

Family

Family plays an important role in expatriate success. Sixty-one percent of expatriates are accompanied by a spouse/partner, 23% are not, and 15% do not have a spouse/partner; 34% do not have accompanying children, 29% do not have children, 30% have children with them, and 6% have some children with them (Cigna, 2013). The adjustment of the expatriate impacts the adjustment of family members while family support can positively influence expatriate job performance (Cho, Hutchings, & Marchant, 2013; Wang & Tran, 2014).

Spouse's careers may be negatively impacted by an expatriate assignment, particularly when the spouse does not speak the language, although in some cases, spouses choose to focus on supporting their families and put careers on hold (Cho et al., 2013). Expat families may also have difficulty settling back in and adjusting to changes in established friendships or schools (Black & Gregersen, 1999) although technology can ameliorate communication gaps between the host and home countries, thus lessening the need for repatriation (Cho et al., 2013).

Language and Culture

Knowledge of the host country language facilitates building social relationships, gaining a better understanding of culture, and challenging stereotypes (Wang & Tran, 2012). Language skills correlate with general and interactional adjustment (Hechanova et al., 2003). Pre-departure and host country cross-cultural training, aimed at understanding learned behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs (Robbins & Judge, 2017; Hofstede 2001), positively impacts expatriate adjustment (Tarique & Caligiuri, 2009; Wang & Tran, 2012) as does language training (Wang & Tran, 2012). In terms of interaction adjustment, language training has the largest impact while host country cross-cultural training has the biggest impact on general adjustment and job performance (Wang & Tran, 2012).

Some expatriates learn the host country language to benefit their current and future careers although it is challenging to find the time and this instrumental approach to language learning may be viewed negatively by host country colleagues (Zhang & Harzing, 2016). In China, when expatriates are willing to learn and are proficient, this results in harmonious relationships; a willingness to learn but inability to use the language results in distant relationships with host country employees while a lack of willingness to learn and inability to speak the language results in indifference, lack of trust, and perceptions that expatriates consider themselves superior (Zhang & Harzing, 2016). As such, language proficiency can play a key role in adjustment and success in some contexts.

Work-related Factors

Areas of concern related to company support, and specifically human resource departments which manage training and facilitate the expatriate experience, include limited understanding about living abroad, lack of information regarding relocation processes and real estate market differences, delays in response time for questions and assistance, delays in visa processing and vacation approvals, and travel costs (Cigna, 2013). Studies are mixed as to whether or not adjustment impacts job performance in the host country with some indicating that it does (Hechanova et al., 2003), and others indicating that it does not (Lee & Sukoco, 2008, 2010).

Ten to twenty percent of managers from the U.S. return early due to dissatisfaction with their employment or adjustment difficulties, nearly a third of those who complete their contracts do not perform to expectations, and a fourth leave the company upon returning home to work for competitors (Black & Gregersen, 1999). When employees return home, they may experience a lack of recognition for their service, devaluation of their skills, demotions, and less authority (Black & Gregersen, 1999). "Companies that manage their expats successfully . . . make the assignments work from beginning to

end” (Black & Gregersen, 1999, para 52). They develop employees’ global leadership skills, help them develop cross-cultural skills, and prepare them to transition home (Black & Gregersen, 1999).

METHODS

Data was collected by means of an online survey with quantitative and qualitative questions. Questions focused on goals, the decision-making process, expectations and preparation, language ability, in-country interaction, adjustment, employer variables, and recollection of a critical incident. The latter was aimed at identifying a defining moment in which participants felt they had achieved their goals for relocation or realized they had not. The critical incident technique focuses on factual reports from observers (Flanagan, 1954); in this case, self-observations in the form of reflection, that indicate the success or failure of an activity.

Questions were aimed at exploring reasons for assignment acceptance, the relevance of factors known to impact adjustment in other contexts (e.g., training, language use, interaction, etc.), and the role of goal identification and attainment. As goals and their fulfillment has not been previously examined, the study sought to fulfill this gap with open-ended questions to encourage respondents to share pertinent experiences without influencing them by providing possible responses. Quantitative questions focused primarily on demographics and factors identified in the literature or those which lent themselves to numbers (e.g., length of time it took to feel at home in Dubai). The study is exploratory and descriptive—it describes a situation in a particular context rather than seeking to predict or explain cause/effect relationships or prove/disprove theory. The purpose is to determine “what is” with respect to a range of variables to determine recommendations for companies sponsoring expatriates, and in particular, the alignment of employer and employee goals and factors impacting the latter.

Expatriates who lived in Dubai from 2010-2016 were invited to participate. This was a convenience sample involving participants who were accessible to the researcher through a personal contact who lived in Dubai during this time. There were also some aspects of a snowball sample as those invited to participate contacted the researcher and suggested additional participants. The sample involved data from expatriates from a variety of countries working for different types of organizations who had differing reasons for moving to Dubai and a range of experiences in the country.

The response rate for the survey was 61% with a total of 42 respondents. The average age of participants was predominantly 35-44 (42%) followed by 45-54 (33%); 94% were married, 88% had children, 48% had four or more children, and 46% were employed while 56% were not employed, suggesting that the latter were accompanying spouses. Area of employment varied with approximately 7% each in legal, information technology, hospitality, and airlines, 47% in education, 13% in health care, and 13% in other fields such as photography and real estate.

Data was analyzed by determining the percentage of responses for fixed choice questions. Open-ended question responses were reviewed using the constant comparative method to determine themes that provided insights related to the research questions through the theories and lenses presented in the literature review (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method is appropriate for exploratory research that seeks to understand some aspect of social phenomena.

FINDINGS

The findings for the study are viewed in relation to the research questions. The latter focused on expatriates’ goals and goal fulfillment. In particular, the study sought to identify factors impacting feelings of success or lack of success. A primary area of inquiry was to have participants identify and reflect on a critical incident to determine if they had attained their goals for moving to Dubai. Themes related to these factors are next discussed.

GOALS

The goals identified by participants fell into two main categories—career advancement and overseas living experience. In the first category, respondents mentioned considerations such as promotion, transfer, and work opportunities, as indicated in the following quotes: “My husband was offered a promotion with his work based there,” “It was an exciting career advancement opportunity,” and “My husband and I got jobs at an international school in Dubai.” Regarding the second category, typical responses included, “Family adventure through a work opportunity,” “We felt it a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and adventure as well as a financial gain for our family,” and “We looked at the experience as a once-in-a-lifetime experience and pursued the extended offer.” Overall, the opportunity was seen as having career, financial, and personal benefits.

A related topic was how respondents determined that relocating would be beneficial to goal achievement. The majority did their own research by means of the internet and reading (39%) and talking to friends or family who had lived there (30%) followed by an actual visit to Dubai sponsored by the employer (18%). Few had any pre-arrival formal training through their companies about what to expect (6%) although the majority (40%) received practical information about visas, transportation, living arrangements, salary and benefits, schools, and shopping, followed by general host country information (17%) such as daily life, history, society, values, and culture (17%). Approximately 27% reported receiving no formal pre-arrival training.

In terms of considerations related to determining if the offered situation would meet goals, participants were very thorough, mentioning items such as children’s education, lifestyle, cost of living, standard of living, tax-free benefits, child care, salary, housing, career, safety, political stability, healthcare, culture (Islamic state), family activities, finances, religious needs, and freedom. One participant expressed it as follows:

Was this a good move professionally? What would our housing be like? How are the schools and other activities for our children? Can we worship there? Will we be able to get the basic things we need? Is this country/city safe? What new opportunities will the offer - cultures, language, travel, experiences? How long is the commitment? What benefits will we have - travel home for visit and repatriation?

Less typically, respondents indicated, “I had wanted to move overseas for some time and never considered NOT accepting the assignment to go,” and “We were living out of suitcases and on the move and another adventure sounded great,” suggesting that personal situations made the decision to relocate relatively easy without much investigation. In most cases, however, respondents were thorough in gathering information, predominantly on their own albeit with some practical information from sponsoring companies, to make the determination as to whether or not the opportunity to relocate to Dubai would lead to achievement of their professional and personal goals and meet the needs of their families.

Factors Impacting Success or Lack of Success

Participant reflections on a critical incident provided evidence of goal achievement or lack of it. Some were able to identify a specific incident, while for others, the feeling grew over time: “Dubai was fantastic. There wasn't a particular incident. Just a build-up of many experiences, especially when I was building the business and felt like I understood the culture.” Goal fulfillment was related to a feeling of personal adjustment for some: “I remember being so excited when I was able to drive from my house to the grocery store without a GPS.” For many, it was related to career success, family experiences, and also finances. The following quotes illustrate.

It was not always an easy place to live simple things in life could be frustratingly difficult to accomplish but it was also a wonderful place to be. Swimming at sunset in the ocean with my family was picture perfect; ultimately, we were there to further my husband’s career so when he

was offered a promotion 3 years later we knew the reason for coming to Dubai had been successful. We enjoyed the adventures we found along the way.

After spending a summer back in the States, I returned with a little trepidation because I remembered the stress that came with the move and beginning of school year the year before. When I returned I was surprised at how easy everything seemed. Navigating the roads, school procedures, and understanding the new yearly holidays wasn't difficult after the learning curve of the first year.

We are still here so haven't made the decision to go home. It's our seventh year. We've achieved a lot of our goals then set new ones. For example, our goal was to pay off our student loans and credit cards. Once that was complete then we set a goal to pay off our house. That will be achieved in the next 7-14 days. Our new goal is to pay off our second home and save.

In contrast, another indicated that "I never felt like we achieved our goals My husband's company moved us back to the USA after 18 months. No member of our family wanted to move back home and felt like we had many goals left unaccomplished." In this case, lack of goal accomplishment was an unexpected work transfer. This was also true for another participant:

We left way earlier than we intended and hoped. The company did not renew my husband's contract and we could not find other employment. So, we wanted to stay about 5 years for various reasons but sadly we were unable. So, in that sense, we did not achieve our goals.

Training, or, in this case, lack of training, did not appear to impact feelings of success, except for in one case.

We loved our day to day living in Dubai. It quickly felt like home to us. However, we foolishly rented our apartment from a fraudster and lost 6 months of rent which in Dubai equaled about \$40000. We did not have any formal training or mentoring to help us avoid a situation like that and is what ultimately caused us to leave Dubai. If not for that event we probably would have stayed longer than the 3 years we were there.

As mentioned, most respondents largely did their own research in terms of making a decision as to whether or not to accept positions in Dubai and pre-arrival training was not widespread. Similarly, only 21% had formal in-country workshops or training (e.g., "My husband attended a meeting that gave him some useful information and we received a booklet"). Even less common was work-specific help, which 10% reported receiving, related to management processes, work culture, styles of communication, expectations, dos and don'ts, cultural values and norms, technical skills, organizational complexity, or global leadership skills. Only 4% experienced informal mentoring on the job.

Similarly, linguistic training or developing skills in Arabic had little, if any, bearing on success, largely because the language of daily life and business was English. The majority (89%) did not speak or study Arabic prior to moving to Dubai. Of those who did (11%), 75% of them were at the beginning level and 25% at the intermediate level. On leaving the country, they reported the same levels of proficiency, having rarely used the language (75%) and predominantly with friends or neighbors (75%) rather than with co-workers (0%) or in daily transactions (25%). One person said:

It was an amazing cultural experience in terms of learning about many other cultures and religions, but we didn't associate with many Emiratis at all and in the 11 years that we lived there we didn't learn to speak Arabic. There was no need.

Factors that did play a role in the success of expatriates were a sense of belonging to a group (54%) and their associations with other expatriates (27%). When asked with whom they mostly associated with, one participant said: "Mostly members of my religious organization, but we have friends and associates from many countries and faiths." Perceptions of success were also related to the feeling of being at home and comfortable in the new environment. One person said, "It's like a wonderful old pair of jeans, never got that feeling it didn't 'fit.'" Another said:

I finally felt like Dubai was a great fit for me after I came home from a two-month vacation in the US and I had both a church community and neighborhood community to come home to. My friends were happy to have me back and it felt to be back. I walk around the neighborhood we live in and I run into friendly faces.

For the majority (42%), it took 3-6 months to feel at home. Another 24% reported taking from 6 months to a year to feel at home, and 30% took over a year, indicating that rates of settling in varied. All but a few felt they had achieved success. For those who did not, it was due to changes in work or early transfers out of Dubai. Factors that impacted success were understanding how things worked, familiarity with and the ability to navigate the environment, and a sense of community. Training and language skills were not impactful.

Unexpected Benefits and Negative Issues

Respondents' experiences in Dubai were largely positive, attested to by their reflection on a critical incident. They were particularly pleased with the range of experiences available in the multicultural environment.

I wanted to learn as much as I could about the ins and outs of Dubai. . . . It was so fun throwing a Thanksgiving dinner with about 20 guests. All but one had never celebrated Thanksgiving before. I loved eating new and unique foods. And making friends from all over the world. It got to the point where I felt like home. There was a western area and more of a melting pot area. My husband and I chose to live in the non-western area. It was a wonderful decision! Those people really turned out to be like extended family.

A few expressed difficulties with their children's and their own adjustment. Health concerns were one of these areas: "My son was sick multiple times and was hospitalized four times while we were there. His immune system was not used to the illnesses he was exposed to." Similarly, schooling was a difficult adjustment in a few cases:

It has taken my son (age 13) awhile [to adjust]. He attends a British school which is quite different than he is used to. He still misses his good friend at home (it's been a year). Friends come and go all the time here. It can be a challenge to have to put yourself "out there" over and over.

This participant also found living in Dubai personally challenging:

I cannot find work here without a degree. I am often lonely. . . . I feel very dependent on my husband here which I am not used to. . . . I find driving here quite nerve wracking so I don't venture far out of our neighborhood.

She did indicate that her "husband has been generally happy."

In another case, cultural and religious conflict was evident:

Within our business and the Emirate itself, the threats to our happiness were threatened to the point we did not feel comfortable staying. An example of this was being threatened to "voluntarily" sign a statement agreeing to show tolerance of others at the risk of being fined and imprisoned. The idea of tolerance the government was really trying to get across was not doing anything a Muslim would consider offensive.

Lack of repatriation training, similar to lack of pre-arrival and in-country orientations, was characteristic, and was a negative factor in some cases. Approximately 81% indicated no training in this area with 24% indicating they were still in Dubai. Regarding whether or not companies had provided formal repatriation training, one participant said, "not formal, but sure could have used some." Another indicated reading a helpful article recommended by another repatriated expatriate. One respondent noted the importance of managing family transitions. He was transferred from Dubai to Dubai rather abruptly, which impacted his children.

In the schools about 25-30 percent of the kids move each year - and you get the same percentage of new kids coming in. So, in the spring you start seeing who is moving and the kids get to have time to say goodbye, and this makes for a good transition (there are still hard things about it) but this planning makes the emotions more positive. We were transferred during the summer when the family was already in the U.S. So, my children kind of went on holiday and never came back. This was really hard!!

He observes that "sometimes moves are needed - but companies need to be flexible in their policies to recognize that when they create such an emotional bind they might do some things to give out of the box support."

Overall, 42% of respondents' concerns about their employment focused on logistics such as transportation, housing, travel, and visas, 20% with a lack of pre-arrival and relocation training, 17% with a lack of employer understanding of challenges, 11% with work conflict, and 8% with company policies, suggesting that employers could do a better job in managing expatriate assignments. Benefits that aided adjustment focused on building relationships to create a sense of family, largely with other expatriates who were also separated from family.

Experiences with Diversity

Dubai was viewed as an international gathering place with participants commenting that "you can't live there without meeting people from around the world," and that they were "rarely with two people from same country." This exposed them to different ways of thinking and provided a rich environment for their children. One participant observed: "12 languages were spoken in my children's school classes, and 10 countries were represented on our neighborhood street." Two excerpts from critical incident reflections illustrate:

I remember standing inside the school yard at my children's school right drop off. As required by the ministry of education, the children sang the Emirati National Anthem each day. I stood and watched as they sang I was moved as I watched all these young little minds and hearts from all over the world belting out the anthem in Arabic. They were learning respect and patriotism and love of all countries, not just their own. It was a moment I knew could not have been created or replicated in the USA.

I realized that I was supposed to be in Dubai from the different service projects I was given the opportunity to be a part of. We handed out care kits during Diwali to the laborers who didn't have much. I was able to build relationships with members of the Sikh community, people who initially seemed very different than me.

Although the expatriates in the study associated with people from all over the world, they “didn't have much interaction with locals in [their] social or work experience” as most (69%) worked primarily with other expatriates and only 10% with locals. One said: “My exposure to the culture of local Emiratis was limited. It seemed locals did not mix with expats very much.” The following comments illustrate further:

I will say I don't feel like I have necessarily had an Emirati cultural experience. I find that because Emirates are only 15% of the population, you don't run into them often and they tend to move in different circles than me. That and I feel like a lot of expats are here on short term contracts like us, so constantly investing in new non-Emirati friendships every couple of years can get exhausting.

In spite of this, participants did learn about the local culture, but this required extra effort: “I tried to go to places that were outside the normal expat areas: the souks and smaller towns. Otherwise you can live in Dubai and not experience a whole lot of local culture.” Another indicated:

Dubai has rich Arabian history and Bedouin roots. Living in an Islamic law country we learnt much about the religion of Islam and gained more understanding of their values and customs e.g., observance of Ramadan and modesty in dress and different views on the rights of women.

Overall, experiences with diversity were rich, though perhaps not in an expected way—that is, with people from the host country.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study further previous research in a number of important ways. First, formal company-based linguistic and cultural training is viewed as critical to successful adjustment (Cho et al., 2013; Cigna, 2013; Morris et al., 2014; Shen, 2005; Wang & Tran, 2012) although this may depend on the context and previous experiences of the expatriates. Participants in this study, representing a range employers and employment sectors, did not generally receive formal pre- or in-country training on language and culture. Information primarily consisted of logistical information about settling in, which is also common (Cigna, 2013; HSBC, n. d.; Kataria & Sethi, 2013; InterNations, 2017; Min et al., 2015). Only a minority of participants indicated that a lack of training and information was a concern.

Indeed, respondents did not appear to suffer from a lack of training, but were able to seek and find needed information on their own. Most of them thoroughly investigated Dubai as a temporary future home, which may have had an impact on their generally positive experiences. Prior to arrival, they reviewed websites (Cho et al., 2013; Morris et al., 2014) and consulted former and current expatriates (Morris et al., 2014). In country, they knew how to learn, and took the opportunity to gain familiarity with other cultures and share their own, and thus, continued to gain needed knowledge about their new environment. Several participants sought opportunities to learn about regional culture and associate with Emiratis although the majority indicated that such interactions were limited, to their regret.

Participants viewed Dubai as largely Westernized and multicultural, with English as the dominant language, which may have ameliorated the need for training to some extent, and also decreased cultural distance (Searle & Ward, 1990; Van Vianen et al., 2004) although for a few, living in an Islamic state was problematic. As to be expected, individuals and families had varying experiences. While most participants did their homework prior to moving and knew what to expect, negative issues did occur, which in some cases, could have been addressed with better company support while in other cases may have suggested a lack of person-environment fit. Generally, participants adapted to the demands of the environment and the environment had the resources to meet their needs (Haslberger et al., 2013).

Although this study did not specifically examine emotional intelligence (e.g., see Geddes & Callister, 2007; Salovey & Grewal, 2005), evidence suggests that participants had coping, stress management, and conflict management skills, which aided their adjustment. Additionally, participants' responses reflected

personality traits such as extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and emotional stability, which have been shown to aid adjustment (Ali et al., 2003; Caligiuri, 2000; Dalton & Wilson, 2000; Lievens et al., 2003; Mol et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006). These traits lend themselves to social interaction, curiosity, comfort with ambiguity, flexibility, relationship building, feelings of competence, and the ability to manage the unfamiliar, all critical in a new environment.

One of the most frequently mentioned benefits of the experience was the extensive diversity among expatriates. In particular, this aspect of the experience was valued for what the children of the expatriates gained through being schooled with children from a multitude of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This is supportive of social interaction research, which indicates that a willingness to establish friendships and learn about, understand, and respect the cultural values of others aids adjustment (Black & Gregersen, 1999). Also, in this case, language training was not a factor in building relationships or understanding of culture, which is an exception to the norm (Wang & Tran, 2012).

In sum, the individuals in this study had specific goals for accepting employment opportunities in Dubai. Goals were focused on career advancement coupled with the desire for an experience living abroad. Most participants carefully considered the impact of the assignment on various aspects of their lives prior to accepting the offer, and were successful in adapting and achieving their goals. Orientation for the assignment consisted predominantly of self-preparation prior to arrival and learning in country as well as logistical information provided by employers. Adaptation consisted of social interaction, primarily with various social groups characterized by extensive diversity. Participant reflections on a critical incident indicated that most felt at home in the new environment due to relationships they had formed and a recognition that the environment was no longer new but felt like home due to their ability to effectively navigate it.

IMPLICATIONS

These findings suggest that selecting individuals for foreign assignments involves ensuring that they have a strong desire to live and work abroad and individual characteristics that involve the ability to gather and analyze information, make sound decisions, form new connections, and navigate unfamiliar territory. Success appears to be primarily dependent on personal characteristics. As such, employers would do well to work with those being considered for foreign assignments through screening that identifies personality traits and determining if employee career and personal goals match the new assignment. This might occur formally or informally. Observations, personal conversations, references, and previous international experience or experiences in diverse environments should be considered. Employers should also get feedback from expatriates who have returned in order to refine their approaches to training and when it is offered, and to determine other needed forms of support.

Ultimately, the decision to offer an assignment on the part of an employer and the decision of the employee to accept it involves careful consideration of numerous factors by both parties in much the same way that occurs with an initial job offer. However, understanding the personal attributes, in addition to technical skills, of the employee, the personalities of the spouse and the family situation, and what it takes to be successful in the new environment are critical to expatriate success. In the case of participants in this study, their goals and the ability to achieve them through their personal traits, skills, and abilities were a match for success.

CONTRIBUTION TO RESEARCH

This study contributes to research by exploring the experiences of a specific group of expatriates and identifying factors impacting their goal achievement. The patterns that emerged provide greater understanding of the phenomena of expatriate success. In particular, the study contributes by demonstrating that formal training did not play a role in adjustment or success. Those who achieved their goals exhibited the ability to seek information, problem-solve, and form diverse relationships; they were open to new experiences and able to manage them. The study also provides new knowledge about a

specific expatriate context, one that hosts a significant number of expatriates and which has unique features that have bearing on adjustment (e.g., no need for knowledge of the host country language, little interaction with local communities, extensive interactive and benefit from involvement in an international community).

This exploratory study provides insights into the lived experiences of expatriates in a particular context and opens additional avenues for future research, specifically how individuals and families prepare for an expatriate assignment, the strategies they use to adjust, and most of all, the role of goals and factors impacting their achievement. When employees and their families achieve their goals, employers also benefit. The small sample size and the qualitative nature of the study make it difficult to generalize the findings, particularly to other contexts. As such, future research could focus on other contexts and populations to explore the applicability of the insights identified in this study.

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