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## **Preparing Managers for Foreign Assignment: The *Expatriate Profile* Program**

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The performance of American managers on international assignments has often been less than what was anticipated. Some estimates of the numbers of managers who are sent abroad and then return home early, before their assignment is complete, are as high as 40 per cent. Each such incident is estimated to cost the employer in excess of \$100,000[1]. There is another group of assignees who, although they remain on station, are regarded as either ineffective or marginally effective by their employers[2]. These outcomes constitute serious problems from the standpoint of the employer and for the careers of employees[3].

Much of the existing expatriate assignment literature is anecdotal, reflecting various efforts to provide more detailed documentation of this problem[4]. Taking another approach, Black, Mendenhall, Oddou and their colleagues[5] have reviewed the relevant research literature and then formulated theories which identify various factors which may influence adjustment processes that are experienced by those assigned abroad. In these efforts, they have drawn on theories of organizational socialization, work role transitions, and also social learning theories. Still another approach has been to develop and then assess the effectiveness of training programmes to increase assignees sensitivity to cross-cultural differences[6]. So far, however, there has been little attempt to focus on and directly address the challenge faced by a manager who has been assigned overseas, i.e., "How should I prepare myself for my upcoming assignment? In what areas should I be prepared to adapt? Where should I be prepared to be inflexible?"

We describe a personal computer program — *Expatriate Profile* (EP) — which is designed to help managers to ask appropriate and relevant questions about their foreign assignment and to reach answers about the different ways in which they should prepare themselves[7]. This is done by encouraging expatriate managers to explore, in anticipation, the various issues that their particular foreign assignment is likely to generate. As a result of such exploration, managers are more likely to approach their new assignment with both less apprehension and more realistic expectations[8].

### **Learning Objectives**

In international transfers, managers leave familiar settings and enter unfamiliar ones. At a personal level, for example, they leave a well-known cultural

environment to join one which is, at least to some degree, foreign, and which may also require some very specific adjustments in living habits. Such adjustments tend to have an even more disruptive impact when managers are accompanied by their families[9]. Because the manager has also moved from being a firm member in the parent country to being a firm member in a foreign subsidiary, organizational role adjustments are also likely to be necessary. Such changes in organizational context almost invariably affect the power, responsibilities and rewards a manager enjoys. At the same time, such changes often introduce new and unanticipated obstacles to job performance. There can be little doubt that an international transfer generates new uncertainties from a variety of different sources.

People usually want to reduce such uncertainty and recreate a sense of control. One approach is simply to ignore the looming uncertainty until one is facing it directly. This is exactly the sort of approach that the literature suggests has led to the current levels of inadequate performance by many expatriate managers. A preferable approach is to explore the person-position match, taking into account what is known about the assigned manager, the new position and the new country and its culture, and then to consider the implications of this available information. Such an exploration will enable managers to make anticipatory adjustments which are likely to increase their level of comfort in carrying out their new assignment. This is the primary objective of EP, i.e. to point out different sources of change and to raise questions in managers' minds as to whether it may be possible to take steps which will bring about anticipatory adjustments that are likely to help them cope with the expected changes.

A second objective of EP education is to help managers consider which among various adjustment modes may be most appropriate in their new situation. Confronted with alternative ways of doing things, it sometimes makes sense to adjust to the local way. This is not always the case, however, for situations exist when it is more effective to avoid an issue completely and/or withdraw. Alternatively, it sometimes makes sense to simply do what one believes is best, the assumption being that one's own preferences may be the basis for a better way of proceeding. Each person probably has a different propensity to employ these adaptive styles, and situations have unique tolerances for different management approaches. In going through EP, the aim is to bring this sort of decision and the associated choices to managers' attention.

The adjustment mode a manager adopts may emphasize a need to change the situation or organizational role or it may emphasize acceptance of constraints imposed by the situation and the role. Again, the aim of the EP program is to make participants aware of the different choices which are available. The program also attempts to raise questions as to the extent to which such choices may be realistic and appropriate so far as different aspects of a particular assignment are concerned. Because the learning objective is to increase awareness, the EP program does not take a position one way or the other as to which mode of adaptation is the better choice.

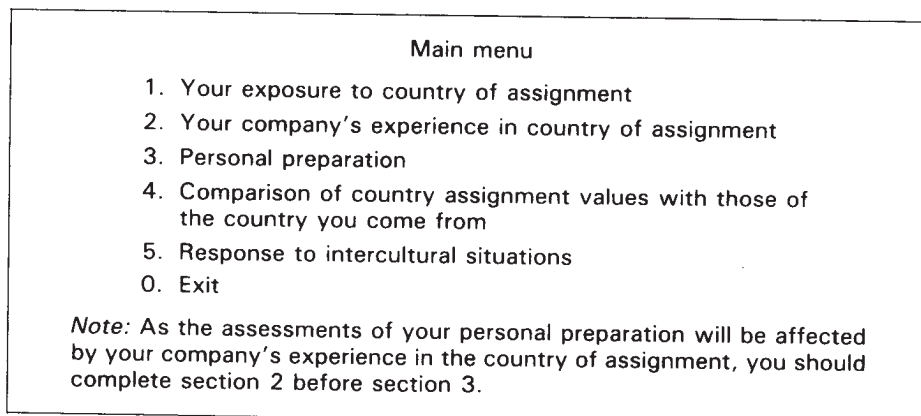
### The Experiential Learning Technology

EP is a self-managed personal computer program. It is designed to generate background information on the manager accepting the assignment and the nature of the position to which he or she has been assigned. It also seeks to obtain information about the organization that the manager is joining and, in particular, how the unit in which the assignee will be working fits within the wider organizational context in terms of its relative size and profitability. Additionally, EP explores the way in which the subsidiary is evaluated and its organizational centrality in terms of whether its main exchange relationships are with other sub-units of the firm, or with other organizations and individuals in the local environment.

To participate in this experiential activity, an individual sits down in front of a computer and turns on the program — EP. After users have identified themselves, the screen explains that the intent is to explore various issues which may arise as a result of their international assignment. It suggests, in general terms, some of the issues which might be considered. It then asks the participant through written prompts to identify the country to which they have been assigned from a menu which includes most countries in the world. Probes are made such that the manager provides details about their own national background and the backgrounds of their family members, the degree of their international experience, and the type of organizational position that they expect they will hold while abroad.

A topic menu then follows (see Figure 1) which describes different areas that the participant can choose to explore in more detail. These include a module which analyzes the foreign subsidiary and its relationship to the parent firm and a module examining the background of the manager and how this background may be related to local subsidiary requirements. There is also a module that considers the manager's intentions, along with those of his or her family, to establish contact and interact with the local culture and their preparedness to do this, and a module directly concerned with the cross-cultural issues that may be expected to arise as a result of going from the manager's home country to the assigned country. Finally, there is a series of items that enables managers

**Figure 1.**  
The Topic Menu of the  
*Expatriate Profile*  
Program



to get a sense of the extent to which they tend to adapt, resist or avoid ambiguous intercultural situations along with a commentary on what some of the advantages and disadvantages of these tendencies may be.

Throughout the simulation, EP generates questions concerning the sorts of issues that are likely to affect the organizational performance of a person assigned overseas. The modules concerned with the manager's own organization, the relation of the firm subsidiary to the parent organization, and the manager's intent to have contact with local culture are, on the one hand, primarily information-generating — they ask the manager to clarify and record his or her beliefs and perceptions of these situations. Based on these perceptions and assessments, the pre-programmed model can often provide feedback concerning some possible implications of the answers provided (see Figure 2). EP can also suggest possible actions which may be advisable, given the situation that the participant has described. By switching roles in its interaction with the participant, from being the questioner to being a supplier of ideas, the structure of EP helps keep the participant involved in an interactive, ongoing learning process.

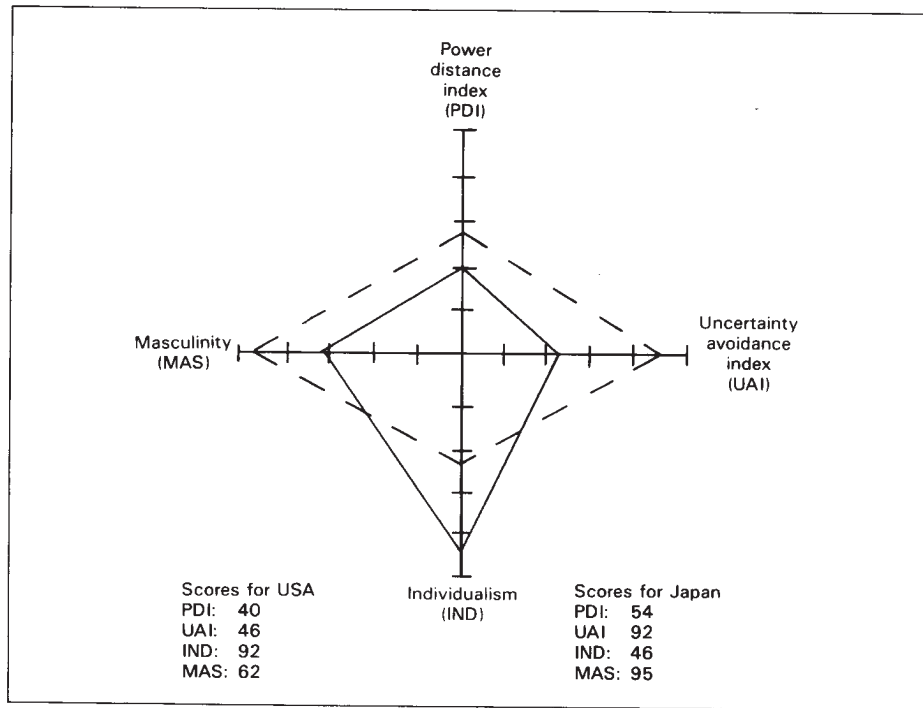
The modules concerned with cross-cultural issues have a different quality to them. Once information about the country of assignment and the manager's home country have been identified, EP can present a personalized tutorial concerning relevant cross-cultural differences. The basis for this tutorial and the implications of the relevant cross-cultural differences is Hofstede's[10] analysis of cross-cultural values and the emphasis which different societies place on maintaining power distances, on avoiding uncertainty, on stressing individualism, and on masculinity (see Figure 3).

Hofstede provided data on approximately 50 countries, leaving a lot of the world unaccounted for. To develop indices for the missing countries, we asked people who had not only lived in the countries but were also familiar with Hofstede's scales to provide estimates — high, medium or low — of how they thought these countries would probably rank on Hofstede's scales. In this way we obtained index estimates for many of the countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Caribbean which are included in EP.

As a result of the differences in these various societies, the tutorial suggests a number of general behaviour approaches which may characterize these

Based on your experience and considering your firm's requirements you seem to be	
Well prepared in:	Not so well prepared in:
Marketing matters Production	Management
Supplier relations Employee relations	Government relations

**Figure 2.**  
An Example of the  
Kind of Evaluation  
Provided by *Expatriate Profile*



**Figure 3.**  
Screen from Hofstede  
Module Comparing  
USA and Japan

countries. Such approaches may initially seem strange or uncomfortable to the manager who has been given the assignment. Yet, creating this type of awareness is, in fact, a focus and a primary learning outcome which is sought by using EP. In addition, EP highlights those dimensions where the differences between what the assigned manager is used to in their home country and practices in the country of assignment are minimal. In these instances, relatively little difficulty should be experienced so far as cross-cultural adjustment is concerned.

#### **How Does Learning Take Place and What Is Learned?**

EP is both a computer simulation and a computer-aided situation analysis system. What it simulates and makes concrete is how managers who have been assigned overseas perceive their new role in the company and their preparation for that role. It matches and compares these perceptions with findings from various research fields. Based on these assessments, EP raises additional questions and suggests possible implications concerning issues which may need to be explored further by the participant.

Simulations and computer-assisted decision aids are usually developed to help people gain personal insights and understandings and, as a result, a sense of control over important situations that are also uncertain and complex. EP is used to test some ideas about what possibly may work and to explore how both the participant and the situation may be influenced by certain initiatives or changes. There are lots of examples available in the technical arena. For



example, aircraft and car designs are often checked out in air tunnels to determine if they have desirable properties. In general, the aim of a simulation is to find how machines or people behave under different conditions and also, how desirable behaviour can be made more likely. Airline pilots, for example, use flight simulators to learn more about flying aircrafts.

In all these cases, the situation being modelled is complex and difficult to predict and control. The assumption made is that, by working with a model of the situation, participants can improve their familiarity and awareness to the point that the actual situation becomes more predictable and controllable. In the case of EP, we ask the participant about their perceptions, their intentions and their assessments so far as their overseas assignment is concerned. Then, based on decision-tree assessments built into the program, we trace out implications of the participant's position along with things he or she should be doing to prepare for their assignment. Thus EP helps the participant, first by asking them to clarify what they know about their assignment, and second by making them more aware of what they do not know but might need to know. It also facilitates learning by suggesting specific ways in which this information may be relevant for the assignment faced. EP, however, makes few direct recommendations. Rather, the underlying assumption is that once relevant questions have been clarified, managers themselves are in the best position to decide for themselves how they should proceed to further prepare themselves for the assignment.

As a result of participating in EP, there are two sorts of learning. One type of learning focuses on getting new information, ideas and insights. People who have not actually lived abroad, for example, may find the notion of 'cultural shock' difficult to imagine or overwhelming in its unknown qualities. EP makes the notion of cultural shock concrete in the context of the particular assignment that the manager is going to undertake. It identifies how, for example, in other cultures there are norms and values which define standards as to what is appropriate — and that these norms and values differ from country to country. It specifies what these norms and values are and describes possible behavioural consequences. As a result, the EP participant learns what to expect and also *respect* in the other culture. Differences become more understandable and the potential for unpleasant surprises is reduced.

The second type of learning involves 'unlearning' inappropriate expectations and attributions with respect to the country of assignment. These inappropriate attributions may occur in the cross-cultural domain. Equally likely, however, are inappropriate expectations so far as the firm is concerned. Relative to the size of the parent company in the home country, many of the concerns which are important to foreign subsidiaries seem insignificant. The idea of having to manage a situation that is relatively unfamiliar, and also having to recognize that in the broader scheme of things your actions may be considered relatively insignificant, is a difficult adjustment to make. Based on insights from the international corporate strategy literature, EP seeks to make this broader context and its implications clear to participants.

### **Examples and Benefits of Participation in EP**

As EP is a simulation, the kind of learning which occurs depends on the interactions between the participant and computer. What people learn and their reactions to their learning vary. A common initial reaction is to be a bit sceptical. Can a computer program and decision aid really give me an analysis which is personally relevant so far as my new international assignment is concerned? EP seems to gain credibility as participants recognize that the initial questions asked are directly relevant and necessary if EP is to make any sort of relevant assessment. Its credibility is further enhanced as it interacts with the participant to make sure it has correctly understood this critical information, and then starts to present text and feedback that are directly relevant to the manager. For example, after having obtained initial information about Roger Dunbar, EP would say, "Roger, you are from New Zealand and your new assignment will take you to the USA. I now want to present you with some information that compares the types of values prevalent in New Zealand with the types of values that are prevalent in the USA". As Roger notices that this information tends to confirm his understanding of New Zealand based on his own experience, he becomes more inclined to believe the information provided by EP about the USA. Through this sort of interactive process, the program builds its own credibility with participants.

Participants' reactions to some of the questions which ask about their employer and the relation between the subsidiary and the parent are characterized, initially, by some bafflement. Many of those assigned overseas have been so concerned about the particular job they will soon be fulfilling and also in finding ways to make personal adjustments, that they have not thought about the organizational context in which they will work. Some managers are unable to answer some of the questions which are posed by EP. On the other hand, most people, after a few moment's thought, start to see why such issues are relevant. A number of managers with overseas experience have commented that had they considered such issues before being sent overseas, their expectations would have been both more realistic and clearer, and some of the disappointments and frustrations they experienced would have been reduced.

Another outcome of participating with EP is developing an overall sense of the cultural issues that one must deal with, along with how they may be dealt with. Participants get an idea of matters that they can deal with before leaving home which will greatly ease their later concerns. They learn about things to ask for while they are still near at hand and in contact with those who can provide help. It is these insights which start to reduce the uncertainty associated with the international assignment and to increase the manager's confidence that they will be able to effectively handle their assignment.

The impact of the design approach used in EP is implicit. The assumption which underlies the design is that it is the participants' opinions and assessments which are most relevant for assessing their situation. Thus, their answers are accepted and never questioned. This is very much in contrast with those computer "expert" programs which profess to provide correct answers based on the input received. Instead, EP focuses effort on exploring the possible implications of the participant's assessments which, of course, may eventually

result in a change of these assessments. But again, this is the choice of the participant. The implicit modelling of respect for the views of others which pervades the design is probably, in itself, an important ingredient likely to increase the chances of success of a manager sent on an overseas assignment.

### Conclusions

EP is an effort at experiential management development and education on the one hand, and an effort at academic research on the other. We see EP as a joint effort linking academic theory with management practice in such a way that there are clear benefits to both.

So far as management development is concerned, we want to provide a program which facilitates the efforts of managers who have been assigned overseas to become quickly and effectively aware of the issues they are likely to confront as a result of their transfer. EP aims to point them in the direction of appropriate preparations. As we believe the EP vehicle is the cheapest, most efficient vehicle currently available to do this, we hope it will achieve widespread use. To encourage this, we will make a current version of EP available free of charge to anyone who requests it[11].

We are aware, however, that in its present form EP is positioned as a general tool rather than being specifically directed at the issues which may confront managers from a particular organization. We think that it may be appropriate for firms who have a large number of people overseas to have customized versions developed in which their particular concerns can be incorporated. We would be happy to hear about such needs and arrange for the development of such versions.

EP is also an academic research endeavour. The EP program generates data which participants are asked to return to us. As a result, we are in the process of building a database which is directed towards understanding the issues that arise in international assignments. It is our intent to become experts in this field, based on this database and the other types of feedback and insights we receive, and to share our findings. Our general objective is to carry out empirical tests of the various theoretical ideas which have been developed concerning the nature of the international transfer process, and to develop ways to diagnose issues likely to affect performance. We also believe that, based on the database, we will be able to develop ways to screen out those who would simply be inappropriate choices to send on international assignments.

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