

A Study on the Impact of Geographical Distance of Expatriates from their Family



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Rapid globalization has made expatriation the essence of business worldwide. Expatriation has eased out many business concerns and penetration of resources. Nevertheless, while working abroad gives international exposure; it has also been a preponderant issue to deal with. Studies reveal influences and many concerns pertaining to expatriation. This paper attempts to understand some of these concerns. The study was conducted by survey method using a structured questionnaire responded by nearly 35 geographically distant couples. The parameters are work environment, adjustments, job stress, family concerns and compensation. The study revealed some interesting observations from the remarkable facts expressed by the respondents.

Keywords: Expatriates, Distance, Work-Life, Family-Life, Stress, Adjustments

1. Introduction

Global indulgence of trade and internationalization of outsourced services paved way for vast opportunities for the workforce to gain experiences abroad. Expatriation has become the essence of business worldwide owing to this pace of globalization. Almost all the multinational companies mainly rely on their expatriates' performance. Assignments abroad, influenced by many factors, buzz the need to focus on the concerns and issues of expatriates as the costs incurred by expatriate failures both in terms of finance and human resource are significantly higher than in the local area. Many organizations relatively new to the international scene underestimate the complex nature of human resource (HR) problems in the international arena and that business failures in the international arena may often be linked to the poor performance of expatriates (Forster, 2000, p – 63-78).

Expatriates perceive working overseas as adapting to too many changes at a time; leaving kith and kin behind, living in an oblivious place and rapid changes for the family to accept. The task of relinquishing the assignment to return home is also not simple though; divergently employers perceive it as a cost incurred and expatriate failure. This indicates the importance of analyzing adjustment thresholds of expatriates and their family during selection and before assessing the probable training needs.

Expatriation has eased out many business concerns and penetration of resources. One of the most essential and the most rapt resource is Oil (Petroleum). It's a known fact that oil industry is in its most chaotic phase but even the existing turbulence has not deterred the industries from holding on to the expats and their expertise. Nevertheless, while working abroad gives international exposure; it has also been a preponderant issue to deal with. Studies show that there are influences and many concerns pertaining to expatriation in oil industry.

2. Review of Literature

Expatriation: Studies conducted on international human resource practices advocate various contemporary factors owing to insufficiency of conventional parameters in dealing with assignment acceptance (Aryee et al., 1996), adjustment (Caligiuri et al., 1998; Shaffer et al., 1999), psychological withdrawal (Shaffer and Harrison, 1998) and commitment (Gregersen and Black, 1996).

Expatriation has been researched much in the aspects of selection, compensation and repatriation procedures. Tung (1987) examined expatriate selection practices across 80 U.S. MNCs, and subsequently, identified four general categories which may contribute to expatriate success. These are broadly described as (1) technical competence on the job, (2) personality traits or relational abilities, (3) environmental variables, and (4) family situation. (Moulik and Mazumdar, 2012, p – 60) Job Factors, Relationship, Motivation, Family and Language are the five attributes of successful expatriation illustrated by Ronen (1989). Time and again there have been research attempts to ascertain factors which influence expatriation which in turn helped in identifying the scope of successful expatriation as suggested by Tung (1981).

One of the major dimensions of expatriation is Long-distance commuting (LDC). The concept is widely applied in the oil, gas and mining industries, as well as in all other industrial activities that take place in outlying areas without adequate indigenous labor supply and that lack prospective attraction for the workforce to relocate for good. LDC is defined by Hobart (1979: 2) as "...all employment in which the work place is so isolated from the worker's homes that food and lodging accommodation are provided for them at the work site and schedules are established whereby employees spend a fixed number of days working at the site, followed by a fixed number of rest days at home. The expectation is that the employees will work an indefinite number of work and home rotation cycles."

In Long distance commuting, the travelling between home and work place is mostly organized by air, often referred to as fly-in/fly-out. Rotor, roster, shuffle or swing are some of the terms workers use to refer to the employment schedule, including time at work and time at home.

Commuting distance, transportation systems, work schedule details, on-site accommodation and other factors can differ significantly between various long-distance commuting operations and it is hence difficult to find one accurate generic descriptive definition (Shrimpton 1994). For example, work spans can vary from a few days to several weeks or even months. What defines the concept and distinguishes it from traditional forms of labor organization is the explicit spatial and sequential separation between the employees' home and workplace (Houghton 1993). Therefore, this form of commuting is used by several employers and industries located in regions with insufficient labour pools, thus giving access to distant labour markets. (Spies, 2006, p – 133-149)

2.1 Experiences of the Expatriates who Commute to Work Offshore

The offshore workforce has significantly contributed to the global economy. Most of these workers operate in shifts, and many are engaged in complex and safety critical activities. Health, safety and competence upholding is as vital as the need to evade attrition loss of the expertise.

In their self-report studies, offshore workers have stated higher levels of free-floating anxiety and higher scores on the General Health Questionnaire, despite also demonstrating a stable extravert personality usually associated with less anxiety. Other studies have indicated relatively high levels of job dissatisfaction and problems with the repeated work/leave adjustment cycle. (Collins, Matthews, Matthews; 2000, 461)

Long-distance commuting affects employees' well-being and family life. Apparently, the compact working schedule disturbs the health and safety conditions. However, these correlations need to be much more verified and understood (Costa 2004). Similarly, the bearing on families is also ambiguous. While it can be rationally argued that the intermittent separations and reunions cause stress on families and that the dearth of parental care is challenging; it is also an undeniable fact that employees do not thwart between the conflicting interests of work and domestic responsibilities and do not have to commute several hours each day, which reduces some stress (Heiler & Pickersgill 2001).

Research on commuting has always questioned on job satisfaction basing on stress as the key aspect. The impact of stress on job performance, health and psychological adjustment has been advocated by McLennan and Bennetts (2003). They have also identified that job satisfaction is influenced by commuting.

Initial research on expatriation suggested adjustment to be supposedly a vital precursor of performance. This extensive assumption made some authors to use adjustment as an alternative for performance, with theoretical haziness on the nature of the relationship between the two constructs (Thomas & Lazarova, 2006). As a result of very limited literature, empirical studies were conducted to examine the relationship between adjustment and performance.

Studies have made a clear distinction between personal and socio-cultural adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990). Personal adjustment means the internal psychological outcomes such as mental health and personal satisfaction. Socio-cultural adjustment denotes external psychological outcomes that connect individuals to their unaccustomed experiences such as the ability to deal with daily problems, particularly in the areas of family life and work (Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999).

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To study the factors which remind the expats of their homes influencing their performance.
2. To understand the impact of geographical distance on the job satisfaction of the expatriates who commute to stay on oil rig offshore.
3. To offer suitable suggestions on understanding and internalizing what makes expatriation successful.

4. Hypothesis of the Study

H₀: Working conditions do not have a bearing on the Geographical distance from the family.

H₁: Working conditions have a bearing on the Geographical distance from the family.

H₀: Geographical distance does not influence the job satisfaction of the Expatriates

H₂: Geographical distance influences the job satisfaction of the Expatriates

5. Research Design And Methodology

Data Collection

The study was conducted by collecting data using a structured questionnaire responded by nearly 35 geographically distant couples owing to husbands working offshore. The questionnaire consisted of three sections – Section A consists of demographic details of the respondents.

Section B comprised the details regarding job in Part I, work environment and satisfaction in Part II and lifestyle & experiences as a long distance commuter's spouse answered by the wives in Part III

Sample

Using convenient random sampling, the data was collected from 35 couple respondents (totaling to 70 respondents) who are long distance commuters working offshore on an oil rig belonging GULF DRILLING INTERNATIONAL and their spouses.

The questionnaire to the offshore crew was administered in person whereas their spouses responded to it via email and telephony. Factors like industry crisis influencing job security and accessibility to offshore commuters momentarily wedged the size of the sample also leading to the nth hour analysis.

6. Analysis and Interpretation

This is purely a study based on simple averages (owing to the sample size) analyzed with the help of five point semantic differential scale ranging from Unadjusted to Adjusted and a five point Likert scale ranging from Strongly agree to Strongly disagree indicating the level of adjustment and agreement respectively. The values from 1 to 3 in the semantic differential scale indicate unadjusted levels and 3 to 5 in the Likert scale indicate disagreement considering the assumption that the midpoint (3) is used to ease out the respondents from directly expressing their discomfort. The mid-point, considered as no opinion on the issue is generally interpreted as a silent yet negative response. (TABLE.NO.1)

Table 1

| Factors | 5 Points Scale | | | | |
|---|----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| ADJUSTMENT LEVEL | | | | | |
| Living conditions | 0 | 2.85 | 20 | 62.85 | 14.28 |
| Housing conditions | 0 | 5.71 | 20 | 57.14 | 17.14 |
| Food facilities | 0 | 8.57 | 31.42 | 45.71 | 14.28 |
| Recreation facilities | 0 | 14.28 | 54.28 | 25.71 | 5.71 |
| Health care | 0 | 11.42 | 28.57 | 45.71 | 14.28 |
| Climatic conditions | 5.71 | 14.28 | 48.57 | 25.71 | 5.71 |
| AGREEMENT LEVEL | | | | | |
| Company values align with personal values | 14.28 | 62.85 | 5.71 | 14.28 | 2.85 |
| Recommend expat lifestyle | 5.71 | 37.14 | 28.57 | 22.35 | 5.71 |
| Prefer rotation over family status | 14.28 | 45.71 | 11.42 | 17.14 | 11.42 |
| Rotation facilitates family events | 2.85 | 42.85 | 5.71 | 28.57 | 20 |
| Workplace is motivating | 2.85 | 31.42 | 14.28 | 42.85 | 8.57 |
| Personal stress impacts work | 8.57 | 42.85 | 14.28 | 28.57 | 5.71 |

The adjustment levels were used to measure issues pertaining to offshore work environment and experiences which hark back the expats to their home. The subsequent factors analyzed include the aspects of expat life-style, family concerns and motivation at work which had a bearing on the performance of expatriates. Whereas the responses from the spouse dealt with their lifestyle and concerns as long distance commuters' wives.

6.1 Working Conditions and its Impact on Geographical Distance

Adjustment Factor

Expatriate adjustment has been commonly defined as “the degree of comfort or absence of stress associated with being an expatriate” (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005, pp-257–281). Adjustment has a crucial role in expatriation success. Successful expatriation is the result of effective adjustment techniques recommended or provided by the companies. An array of strategies recommended ranging from private, non-shared, superior accommodation; noise minimization and policies to minimize sleep disruption for shift workers; worker self-care induction & facilitation including varied and healthy food choices, fitness and sporting facilities; fatigue management policies; after hours social opportunities including alcohol free recreation options; travel assistance and minimization of travel disruption so workers arrive home as expected; flexibility in shift hours and roster arrangements; flexible family friendly policies regarding phone contact during work hours and arrangements for home emergencies; preparation of children for worker departure and arrivals; negotiation of parenting tasks, roles and responsibilities of worker and partner to minimize family disruption; and adequate health and counseling services all contributed to the professed success of expatriate assignments. (Misan and Rudnick, 2015, Art. 6). Consequently, it is a proven fact that communication and adjustment are positively correlated to job satisfaction, coping with stress and increased support with local work cultures (Kim 2008, Xu 2009).

Positivity: The Facilitating Factors

The facilitating factors observed in the study - living and housing conditions as well as the food & healthcare provided offshore seems to be exceedingly appreciable, perhaps this inclines the expats to adjust well with their job responsibilities and their spouses to provide them with adequate support to focus on work. Their spouses too have expressed their content in terms

of lifestyle and healthcare. This is also corroborated by the spouses' positive response about having the best of both the worlds; his Work-life and Home-life.

Perceptibly previous studies attest the positive effects flaunted by the industry and workers in terms of - financial rewards; improved lifestyle; compressed work schedules; extended leisure time; enhanced quality of life at home; job mobility without family disruption; limited disruption to children's education; uninterrupted extended family time between rotors; enhanced personal, interpersonal, and family well-being; training and study opportunities with resulting career progression; personal satisfaction, and offer of rewarding and challenging work; worker and partner resilience to various stressors, among others (Houghton, 1993; Macbeth, Kaczmarek, and Sibbel, 2012). This is validated with the observation made both on the standards of performance and expectations set for the crew which seem to be exceedingly fair with more than 80% of the respondents expressing their comfort in well-adjusted levels and also their contentment with the composition of fly-in/fly-out time despite the fact that every moment spent on their travel (considered to be from their time off from work) relays pain of losing out on their holiday time while fly-out and departing from family while fly-in.

This observation is also endorsed by the responses to the alignment of company values with individual values pertaining to work & life balance and remarkably by their preference of commuting to work over family status. (TABLE.NO.2)

Table 2

| FACILITATING FACTORS | | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Living conditions | 0 | 2.85 | 20 | 62.85 | 14.28 |
| Housing conditions | 0 | 5.71 | 20 | 57.14 | 17.14 |
| Food facilities | 0 | 8.57 | 31.42 | 45.71 | 14.28 |
| Health care | 0 | 11.42 | 28.57 | 45.71 | 14.28 |
| Company values align with personal values | 14.28 | 62.85 | 5.71 | 14.28 | 2.85 |
| Prefer rotation over a family status | 14.28 | 45.71 | 11.42 | 17.14 | 11.42 |

Issues: The Inhibiting Factors

The concerns identified in this study are very intriguing and perplexing. While the respondents have expressed their contentment with performance standards & expectations; living & housing conditions; healthcare & fly-in/fly-out time, it is startling to notice that their work is not considered to be motivating enough or worth recommending to their family and friends. Perhaps the climatic conditions and entertainment provided offshore identified from the adjustment factors are influencing their job satisfaction. Majority of the respondents (68.5%) expressed their discomfort with respect to entertainment provided to them and the offshore climatic conditions.

Given the fact that almost all the time they work offshore and get just a day or two of transit during their fly-in/fly-out schedule, the respondents seem to be quite apprehensive about the shopping aspect of their work place. Though their nature of work does not give them a chance to interact with host nationals on day-to-day basis, the offshore crew does get to stay onshore during fly-in and fly-out. Apparently their interaction to the host nationals could be when they do shopping for their family and their experiences don't seem to be pleasant enough which could be topping their apprehension regarding shopping time given.

Literature has evidently described that the negative effects in long distance commuting include loneliness; worker and partner stress from long periods away from home; fatigue from shift work and long hours; increased rates of anxiety, depression and suicide; sadness over missed family events; physical health problems related to overweight and obesity; family dysfunction and diminished quality of personal, interpersonal, and family wellbeing; marriage breakdown; high levels of indebtedness, as well as alcohol and other substance abuse. (Misan and Rudnik, 2015, Art. 6)

Family concerns are paramount to job satisfaction; this is evident from the observation made on the rotation compatibility to attend special family occasions. It is alarming to notice that more than half of the respondents expressed disagreement on the statement that their rotation facilitates them to attend family occasions like birthdays, anniversaries and festivals most of the times. Although they prefer commuting than living with family status and are content with the time composition, the fact that they miss out on family occasions could be a significant personal stress factor influencing their motivation. Stress has been a major dimension for research on expatriation. Especially, personal stress of the long distance commuters has been identified as an explicit concern. Almost half of the crew have expressed that personal stress impacts work. Well motivated workforce is a driving force for success. The observation made on the aspect of motivation from work place is quite alarming as majority of the respondents expressed that they don't feel their workplace motivates them to focus on work. (TABLE NO.2.1)

Table 2.1

| INHIBITING FACTORS | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| Recreation facilities | 0 | 14.28 | 54.28 | 25.71 | 5.71 |
| Climatic conditions | 5.71 | 14.28 | 48.57 | 25.71 | 5.71 |
| Recommend expat lifestyle | 5.71 | 37.14 | 28.57 | 22.35 | 5.71 |
| Rotation facilitates family events | 2.85 | 42.85 | 5.71 | 28.57 | 20 |
| Workplace is motivating | 2.85 | 31.42 | 14.28 | 42.85 | 8.57 |
| Personal stress impacts work | 8.57 | 42.85 | 14.28 | 28.57 | 5.71 |

7. Conclusion

Working offshore entails risk, insecurity and stress; studies conducted by Sibbel (2010) and Henry, Hamilton, Watson & Macdonald (2013) have suggested that regular communication with the family, location and size of the worksite, length of rotors, accommodation facilities, and family concerns are some of the contributing factors to impact long distance commuting. Endeavoring to analyze the process where there is a twining of work and family, we represent the concerns pertaining to long distance commuting expatriates. It is evident from the study conducted that apart from working conditions which tend to hark back the expats to their home, family concerns too de motivated and influence the performance of the expats.

The observations made through this study show that working conditions such as climatic conditions of the workplace, recreation facilities provided at the workplace and missing out family events overshadow the positivities like living & housing conditions, healthcare facilities, food provided at the workplace as well as contentment of the family with respect to the time off from work and lifestyle. Consequently the inhibiting factors have a bearing on the geographical distance and thus de motivated the expats influencing their job satisfaction.

Negativities associated with long distance commuting like increased rates of anxiety, desolation over missed family events; physical health problems related to overweight and obesity; family dysfunction and diminished quality of personal, interpersonal, and family wellbeing have been proved in various studies (Clover-Taylor and Simmonds, 2009; Pini and Mayes, 2012). It is high time companies address these concerns by providing adequate support to overcome stress. Sufficient recreation facilities and facilities to bust the stress caused by the climatic conditions with compatibility in rotors to ease out a few family occasions could make the workforce an asset to cherish.

The accessibility to offshore crew and willingness to participate owing to the turbulence in oil industry topped with time constraint are the limitations to this study. Further investigations with larger samples and specifying family concerns would provide added knowledge about the lives of the much curtailed community of offshore workforce.

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