

The impact of gender and location on the willingness to accept overseas assignments

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Lowe, K. B., Downes, M. & Kroeck, K. G. (1999). The impact of gender and location on the willingness to accept overseas assignments. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 10(2), 223-234.

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Abstract:

Business students in two universities were queried regarding their willingness to accept international postings. In contrast to Adler's (1984a, 1986) findings, gender was a significant predictor when specific referent countries were identified. Country characteristics considered here included cultural distance (or the difference between the cultures of the respondent's home country and that of the referent location) and the levels of development and political risk in the referent country. Differences among countries on indices of cultural distance and human development explained substantial variance among males and females in their willingness to accept international assignments. Political risk, however, was not significant in explaining these gender differences.

Keywords: Overseas assignments, cultural distance, political risk, level of development, willingness to expatriate, location considerations.

Article:

Introduction

In attempting to explain why so few North American women work as international managers, Adler (1984a, 1984b, 1986) centred her empirical investigations around the following three 'myths':

Myth 1: Women do not want to be international managers.

Myth 2: Companies refuse to send women overseas.

Myth 3: Foreigners' prejudice against women renders them ineffective, even when interested and sent.

This study is a reaction to the findings regarding the first myth — that male and female MBA students displayed no significant differences in their interests to pursue international careers. Though males and females appeared equally interested in expatriate positions 'at some time during their careers' or in wanting their first job to be 'in a foreign country', these inquiries were made without regard to a specific assignment location. Each respondent, then, was allowed to conjecture a referent international posting that is ideal to that individual, potentially resulting in an inconsistent manipulation of the responses.

Since the use of referents is fundamental to human cognition (Feldman, 1981), our expectation is that providing equivalent referent countries may elicit different levels of interest among males and females. For example, while there may be no gender differences in willingness to go somewhere in the world, there may be large gender differences in the appeal of specific locations such as Brazil, Saudi Arabia or Zaire. The current study examines gender differences in the willingness to relocate overseas when a referent country is provided. Thus, it is hypothesized that, when considering specific host-country locations, gender differences will provide significant explanatory power.

Characteristics of the referent country

Historically, the division of labour by sex has been almost universal (Ronen, 1986), but these differences may represent greater career obstacles in some cultures than in others. While sex roles are quite fluid in the

Scandinavian societies of Norway, Finland and Denmark, they are considerably more differentiated in Germany, Italy and Japan. The Japanese, in particular, maintain that men should be assertive and that women should be nurturing (Hofstede, 1980), thereby promoting careers in business as 'masculine' and in nursing as 'feminine'. Adler (1987) reports that very few Asian women are found in managerial roles in large companies, but that attitudes towards local women do not extend to the Gaijin (women as foreigners). In short, she contends that expatriate women will be better received in Asia than is anticipated by US multinational corporations (MNCs).

Miller (1975) concluded that American expatriates on assignment in Europe were more satisfied (i.e. were less need-deficient) than American expatriates in Latin America. This may be due, in part, to the inability of some countries to provide the foundation for fulfilling higher-order needs. For example, an expatriate on assignment in a highly collectivist environment, where individual achievement is neither valued nor rewarded, may be deficient in his/her needs for self-esteem. These findings lend some support to the idea that country or region may be important in attracting expatriate personnel. To the extent that needs vary by gender, this may also suggest that location attractiveness may differ for males and females.

In asserting that assignment location will account for differences in the willingness to work overseas among males and females, several aspects of the host environment may be relevant. Specifically, host-country culture (in comparison to that of the home country), level of economic development and extent of political risk may impact on the assignment's relative attractiveness to a potential expatriate. These characteristics are discussed in turn.

Culture

Culture has been defined as 'the collective mental programming of people in an environment' (Hofstede, 1980) and has been a dominant issue in recent comparative management theory. As a result of a massive survey of employees of a major US multinational firm, Hofstede (1980) identified four dimensions of work-related values on which country cultures can be differentiated: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and masculinity (Hofstede, 1980, 1993).

A fifth dimension, Confucian Dynamism, was borne out of a later survey (Hofstede and Bond, 1988), and reflects a dynamic, future-oriented mentality often associated with the recent economic growth of East Asian nations (Hofstede and Bond, 1988). High scores on this dimension represent future-related values such as thrift and persistence, where low scores represent past- and present-related values such as respect for tradition and fulfilling social obligations (Hofstede, 1993).

Scores on each of these cultural indices represent the extent to which that characteristic is present, allowing for cross-cultural comparisons. It is also possible to make comparisons simultaneously on the basis of several cultural features. For example, by combining scores on the cultural dimensions, the degree of difference between various cultures can be assessed.

Cultural distance

Several research studies have addressed the issue of cultural distance (Johanson and Weidersheim-Paul, 1975; Kogut and Singh, 1988; Mendenhall and Oddou, 1986). Whether it is labelled culture novelty, psychic distance or cultural toughness, the concept refers to differences in culture, usually between that of the home and of the host country. This cultural toughness (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1986) is a function of alien value systems (such as work ethics), unusual educational backgrounds, language barriers and business practices (Willis, 1984), all of which can be sources of frustration for the expatriate. Black and Stephens (1989), for example, found culture novelty to have a negative impact on the general adjustment of US expatriates and their spouses during the overseas assignment.

In highly distant cultures, job titles may not match actual task functions, and training local associates and subordinates may be highly frustrating. Rosenzweig and Nohria (1994) found that resemblance to local human

resource management (HRM) practices is negatively related to the cultural distance between the home and host countries. In addition, finding a job for one's spouse may be illegal, if not impossible, and routines may be subtly or radically changed. Furthermore, traditional support systems for job or personal difficulties are generally non-existent.

Cultural distance may also represent a double-edged sword for the MNC. The more the host and home cultures differ, the greater the need for home-country nationals in order to facilitate the transfer of technology, management know-how and other core competencies, especially in the early stages of development (Adler and Ghadar, 1989). However, attracting personnel from the home country may be more difficult with increased cultural distance.

Level of development

In a survey of eighty international corporations, Tung (1981) found that local managers are used more in developed countries than in less developed countries (LDCs), due to a larger pool of skilled personnel. Unfortunately, she reports, it is with LDCs that host and home countries differ most.

The entirely new environment of an LDC, then, calls for drastic expatriate personal adjustment. For example, it would be more difficult for a US expatriate to adjust to the culture of Kenya than to the culture of Australia (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1986) and more difficult to adjust to Thailand than to the UK. (Tung, 1981). In addition, research shows that Westerners have had great difficulty adjusting in LDCs, such as China and the Middle East, due to the relatively undeveloped infrastructure and lack of adequate facilities (Tung, 1986), suggesting that home-country nationals would be less attracted to underdeveloped locations.

Political risk

According to Oseghale (1993), political risk is characterized by inter-nation conflict and by abrupt changes in government policies. Kobrin et al. (1980) define political risk as the impact of political change on operations and on the decision-making process. Political risk includes such items as social unrest potential, potential security threats, regional alliances and inter-nation relations (Boyacigiller, 1991). Risky environments, therefore, are less attractive to foreign firms (Gomes-Casseres, 1990), and hence to foreign personnel, as they may not be efficient in these environments (Boyacigiller, 1991).

Method

Sample

Survey respondents consisted of 217 graduate and undergraduate business students in two culturally diverse universities in the Southeast United States. The student sample was deemed appropriate, as these individuals had significant work experience and many would soon be entering or re-entering the job market. Furthermore, we were interested in comparability to Adler's sample, which was composed of graduate students. Sample mean years of total and full-time work experience were 8.3 years and 5.3 years respectively, and the average age was 26. The selection of culturally diverse universities had the intended effect, yielding a multicultural sample with 39 per cent of the total sample born in twenty-nine different countries outside the US and a majority of respondents' parents born outside the US (mothers, 64 per cent; fathers, 57 per cent). The mean number of years in which respondents had lived outside the US was 7.7. Genders were evenly represented (51 per cent female and 49 per cent male). Evaluations of the demographic characteristics of the undergraduates and graduate students yielded no significant differences.

Data collection

Primary data

Questionnaires were administered in several business classes throughout 1994 and 1995. Surveys were completed anonymously, in class, but students were not offered any course credit for their compliance. Care was taken to ensure that no student completed the survey twice in the event of enrolment in more than one of the surveyed classes.

Demographics

Respondents provided information regarding personal and parental birth country, age, gender, number of years of full and part-time work experience, and the number of years they had lived in a country other than the US.

Willingness to work overseas (WWO)

Respondents were asked to read a narrative indicating that they had been offered an overseas position with a Fortune 100 company. It was stated that the minimum length of the assignment would be three years and that benefit increases and promotional opportunities over the assignment period were expected to equal those in the US. Respondents were asked to consider forty-one different assignment locations (listed alphabetically) and to indicate whether they would accept or reject the position. Those participants who indicated a willingness to accept a position at any of these locations, then rated the attractiveness of an assignment in each of these locations. Assignment attractiveness was rated on a five point scale with the authors 'unattractive', 'somewhat unattractive', 'neutral', 'somewhat attractive' and 'attractive'. Next, respondents were asked to rank the five most attractive and unattractive locations, and to justify their choices as a further qualitative indicator of quantitative results.

In designing the survey, countries were selected so that each of the six populated continents were represented, as well as both long-standing, free-market economies and emerging markets. Small and large nations were included to allow for variance in country characteristics.

Secondary data

Cultural distance

Cultural distance was calculated using the procedure provided by Kogut and Singh (1988). The index employs Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, forming a composite index on the deviation of each country's scores on each dimension from those of a given country (in this case, the US). Each of the cultural dimensions discussed above (with the exception of Confucian dynamism) was operationalized using the country scores provided by Hofstede (1980, 1983). It should be noted that scores were available, for the present study, for thirty-one of the countries directly, and for five others when grouped by region. Scores were not available for China, Romania, Scotland, Vietnam and Zaire, and these countries could not be reliably classified by region for purposes of this study.

The procedure for calculation of the cultural distance index was developed prior to the establishment of Confucian dynamism as the fifth cultural dimension. We excluded this dimension from our analyses because scores have not been established for all countries and because the procedure for calculating the index precedes the publication of information on the dimension. Cultural distance, therefore, was calculated on the basis of the power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and masculinity dimensions as provided by Hofstede. The following formula was applied:

$$CD_j = \{S(I_{ij} - I_{iu})^2 / V_i\} / 4$$

where CD_j represents the cultural distance between a particular country and the US, I_{ij} stands for the i^{th} cultural dimension of the j^{th} country, I_{iu} is the index for the i^{th} cultural dimension of the US and V_i represents the variance of the index of the i^{th} dimension.

Level of development

In 1990, the United Nations published the Human Development Index (HDI), based on three measures \pm life expectancy, literacy rates and average incomes based on purchasing power parity estimates. The HDI is scaled from 0 to 100, with countries scoring less than 50 classified as having low human development, 50 to 80 having medium development and above 80 having high development. This index and its numeric scores were adopted here as the measure of economic development in the countries under study.

Degree of Political Risk

Political risk was measured using an annual index of international business climates provided by Political Risk Services of Syracuse, New York. The numerical index is based on seventeen factors, including turmoil risk (the likelihood of riots and terrorism) and financial transfer risk (the non-convertibility of local currencies). The index ranges from 0 for countries with the riskiest climates to 100 for nations with the most favourable environments for business. For the purpose of this study, political risk scores were reverse-coded so that low scores corresponded with low risk factors.

Results

An index of the percentage of respondents willing to work overseas (WWO) was calculated for each of the forty-one countries. The demographic variables were regressed on the WWO index, using stepwise regression, in an effort to identify potential predictors. Only one variable entered the model, respondent gender ($R^2=.07$,

Table 1 *Proportional test for gender differences in willingness to work overseas*

	<i>Percentage of total willing to work overseas (n= 217)</i>	<i>Percentage of males willing to work overseas (n= 106)</i>	<i>Percentage of females willing to work overseas (n= 111)</i>	<i>z-test for gender difference³</i>
Argentina	48.90	63.20	36.00	4.11***
Australia	66.20	77.40	56.80	2.29*
Brazil	42.00	57.50	27.00	5.43***
Canada	79.90	77.40	82.00	-0.43
Chile	33.80	45.30	23.40	4.80***
China	26.50	31.10	22.50	2.42*
Columbia	26.40	33.00	20.50 ²	3.54***
Costa Rica	46.60	57.50	36.90	3.26**
Denmark	49.30	63.20	36.90	3.93***
Finland	42.90	57.60	29.70	4.79***
France	68.50	73.60	64.90	0.93
Germany	54.30	63.20	46.80	2.22*
Great Britain	75.80	77.40	74.80	0.25
Greece	49.30	57.50	41.40	2.43*
Hong Kong	42.00	49.10	36.00	2.30*
India	11.90	16.00	8.10	5.08***
Indonesia	13.20	19.80	7.20	7.22***
Israel	21.90	27.40	17.10	3.51***
Italy	64.40	67.90	62.20	0.65
Japan	59.40	70.80	48.60	2.77**
Jordan	11.90	14.20	9.90	2.76**
Kenya	13.70	16.00	11.70	2.38*
Korea	17.40	23.60	11.70	5.15***
Mexico	46.30	55.20	38.70	2.63**
New Zealand	48.40	59.40	38.70	3.16**
Nigeria	16.40	20.80	12.60	3.75***
Norway	46.90	55.70	37.80	2.86**
Peru	31.50	38.70	25.20	3.18**
Portugal	36.10	44.30	28.80	3.18**
Romania	16.40	19.80	13.50	2.89**
Saudi Arabia	16.40	26.40	7.20	8.80***
Scotland	49.80	59.40	41.40	2.67**
South Africa	24.20	29.20	19.80	2.90**
Sweden	59.80	74.50	46.80	3.41***
Taiwan	23.70	30.20	18.00	3.83***
Tanzania	11.00	15.10	7.20	5.52***
Thailand	27.40	33.00	22.50	2.85**
Turkey	14.60	20.80	9.00	6.10***
Venezuela	47.50	52.80	42.30	1.65
Vietnam	7.30	12.30	2.70	10.29***
Zaire	14.30	18.10 ¹	10.90 ²	3.79***

Notes

1 n= 105.

2 n= 112 (Columbia) n= 110 (Zaire).

3 z-test for the equality of two proportions (Kanji, 1993: 25). Negative z-values indicate a greater percentage of willingness to work overseas for females.

* p< .05; ** p< .01; *** p< .001.

$p < .001$). Thus we separated the sample by gender in an effort to better understand how gender differentiates the willingness of respondents to accept the international assignment. Table 1 provides the percentages willing to accept an international assignment by country for the combined sample and by gender.

A z-test of proportions was performed to determine if significant differences existed between genders in the willingness to accept a particular country assignment. Significant differences were found for thirty-six of the forty-one countries; no differences were found for Canada, France, Great Britain, Italy and Venezuela. The greatest differences were found in the willingness to work in Vietnam, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. For each of these countries where significant differences existed, males exhibited greater willingness to work overseas. Canada was the only country for which females expressed greater interest than males, although this difference was not significant.

To investigate whether respondent lineage impacted on these results we re-conducted this analysis excluding those responses where respondent or respondent parents' birth country matched the target country.¹ Excluding these matches generally had a marginal impact on the WWO index with only five of the forty-one target countries showing a change greater than one percentage point (Australia, Columbia, Israel, Mexico, Venezuela). The direction of the change was an increased WWO for twenty-eight countries, no change for two countries, and a decrease in WWO for eleven countries. While great caution should be exercised in interpreting such small differences, the general preponderance of increasing WWO when respondent-target matches are excluded is surprising. Perhaps there is some sort of 'familiarity breeds contempt' phenomenon at work. Most importantly for purposes of the present study, the small changes in the revised percentages for males and females did not impact on the conclusion of (no) gender differences for any of the forty-one countries.

Country attractiveness ratings were examined to determine if further gender differences would be revealed that might show the degree of attractiveness to specific locations. Attractiveness ratings were entered in a discriminant function analysis to determine if attractiveness of assignment in different countries could be used to identify whether the respondent was male or female. Using this technique, we were able to determine: a) if degree of attractiveness of different countries held the same meaning as willingness to accept a job assignment, b) if significant differences between males and females exist in attractiveness of the forty-one countries, and c) which countries, if any, best separate the gender groups in terms of perceptions of country attractiveness. Results of the discriminant analysis showed that the gender groups could be separated by country attractiveness (Eigenvalue = .1342, Wilk's $S = .88$, $W^2 = 27.27$, $p < .0001$) and that attractiveness of different countries is related to but not synonymous with willingness to accept a foreign assignment. Specifically, three countries were found to differentiate males and females significantly in terms of country attractiveness ratings: Korea (Wilk's $S = .88$, $p < .0001$), Sweden (Wilk's $S = .90$, $p < .0001$), and Brazil (Wilk's $S = .93$, $p < .0001$). While males were mixed in their ratings of these countries, females were quite consistent in rating these three countries as low in attractiveness.

To understand some of these differences, correlational analysis was used to examine the relationships between the various characteristics of the referent countries (e.g. political risk) and respondents' willingness to work there. These results, together with the means and standard deviations for each variable, are shown as Table 2.

Level of development in the referent country was significantly and positively related to WWO, suggesting that, as the level of economic development increases, the foreign-posting attractiveness increases. Conversely, cultural distance and political risk were negatively related to WWO, suggesting that, as the level of cultural distance and political risk increases, foreign-posting attractiveness decreases. Similar patterns were observed when the sample was separated by gender.

Three multiple stepwise regressions were conducted with each of the three sample sets (total sample, male, and female). This was done to determine how much variance each of the independent variables accounted for in WWO. The results are reported as Table 3. In each of the models, the HDI entered first and explained a large and significant portion of the total variance ($R^2 = .55, .61, .45$, for total, males, and females respectively). The

variable entering second, in all three models, was the cultural distance index. Political risk failed to contribute significantly to the regression equation in all three models.

Table 2 Means, standard deviations and correlations for all variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Percentage of total sample willing to work overseas	36.67	19.99	1.00					
2 Percentage of males willing to work overseas	44.03	21.32	.98**	1.00				
3 Percentage of females willing to work overseas	30.13	19.57	.98**	.93**	.93**	1.00		
4 Cultural distance	2.21	1.21	-.42*	-.36*	-.46**	1.00		
5 Political risk	21.53	13.72	-.48**	-.49**	-.46**	.15	1.00	
6 Level of development	81.08	19.76	.74**	.77**	.69**	-.20	.70**	1.00

Notes

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

To investigate whether respondent lineage impacted on these results we re-conducted this analysis excluding those responses where respondent or respondent parents birth country matched the target country.² Excluding these matches resulted in nonsignificant reductions in R^2 from .602 to .595 for total sample, .631 to .622 for males, and .539 to .526 for females.

Given that the cultural distance index entered and that the components of the index were available, ad hoc analyses were conducted to determine how each of the Hofstede dimensions contributed to the explanatory power of the index. The cultural distance index was removed and the four individual index scores were entered into the equation. Both individualism and power distance explained significant variance in all three models (males, females and combined), while uncertainty avoidance and masculinity failed to enter in any of the three models. In all three models, the amount of variance explained was higher when the Hofstede dimensions were entered separately ($R^2 = .71$ for the total sample) than when the cultural distance index was used ($R^2 = .60$ for the total sample).

Limitations

It should be noted that the current study, while providing specific referent locations on which to rate attractiveness, was less comprehensive in its sampling than was Adler's research. Where Adler was able to solicit responses from more than 1,000 students at multiple universities, the current study focused on 200 respondents from two university sites. Although this may limit the generalizability of findings to other student populations, it was possible with a narrow set to obtain qualitative responses regarding the sources of attractiveness ratings.

Summary and discussion

Results of this study show that males and females consistently differ in their willingness to work in specific referent overseas locations in thirty-six of forty-one countries. This is in contrast to Adler's (1984a, 1986) findings that male and female students displayed no significant differences in their interests to pursue international careers. The results of the current study are of practical use given that most firms are interested in an individual's willingness to accept particular assignment destinations rather than willingness to expatriate somewhere in the world.

Table 3 Result of regression analysis for determinants of willingness to work overviews

Independent variable	Total		Male		Female		Chg rsq
	Beta	t	Beta	t	Beta	t	
Level of development	0.678	5.94***	0.731	6.65***	0.6	4.89***	0.434
Cultural distance	-0.292	.02*	-0.225	-2.05*	-0.347	-2.80**	0.105
Political risk	-0.026	0.861	-0.001	0.99	-0.056	0.728	
F	25.23***		28.33***		19.67***		
Adjusted R-square	0.602		0.631		0.539		
N	31		31		31		

Notes

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

The use of indices of human development, cultural distance and political risk in the present study provides important insights into those factors making international assignments attractive or unattractive. Level of development was a significant and powerful predictor of willingness to accept specific international assignments, and cultural distance added significant explanatory power to the WWO model. While the idea of cultural distance has received considerable attention in the expatriate literature (Johanson and Weidersheim-Paul, 1975; Kogut and Singh, 1988; Mendenhall and Oddou, 1986), it appears that the level of economic development deserves increased attention. Survey respondents were asked to list the five most attractive and least attractive international postings and to justify their decisions qualitatively. Themes that consistently

emerged included standard of living, familiarity of cultures, avoidance of countries with reputations for political turmoil or oppression of women and desirability of location/climates. These anecdotal responses indicate that individuals value developed countries for their access to adequate infrastructure, cultural events and increased choices in product markets, which appear to compensate to some extent for concerns regarding cultural distance or political risk.

The finding that two Hofstede dimensions, either individually or in tandem, had greater explanatory power than the four-dimension index is a new finding that may be of great import to future researchers. Similarity on the masculinity index has been identified as an important factor in prior research on willingness to expatriate and on expatriate adjustment, yet it failed to enter any of the three models. In addition to any variance that masculinity may have shared with the significant dimensions, it should be noted that both individualism and power distance are characterized as most important from a leadership perspective (Hofstede, 1980), and expatriate assignees typically fill management positions. To illustrate, appropriate leadership behaviour in an individualistic society may involve individual recognition and reward, and, in a similar vein, leadership in high power distance cultures would preclude 'fraternizing' with subordinates. Further research replicating these findings is needed before any substantive speculation can be made. But, if these results are replicated, it may signal a fundamental shift in the importance placed on the values prevalent in other cultures.

One implication of the current research for managerial purposes is that specific locations may be differentially attractive to males and females. Thus, organizations wishing to develop gender balance in international assignments for developmental purposes, as one aspect of a diversity initiative, might be informed as to the relative ease of attracting gender groups to specific international postings.

This research also makes several important contributions to the expatriate literature. First, this study calls into question Adler's findings — that there are no gender differences in international career interests. These findings have been widely cited and have remained essentially unchallenged for nearly a decade. Despite the intuitive appeal of Adler's conclusions, the finding of significant gender differences for thirty-six of forty-one countries provides compelling evidence for an alternative interpretation. Second, by adding the use of specific country referents, this study provides an improved methodology for researching the factors regarding willingness to expatriate. Third, the current study provides several indices of country characteristics that appear to significantly predict the perceived attractiveness of international postings. Future research on host-country attractiveness might focus on other variables which might influence these effects such as salary, promotional opportunities, and professional development to determine whether such situational variables intensify or alleviate these differences.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meetings of the Academy of Management. We wish to thank Nancy Adler and Mary Ann Von Glinow for their comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

Notes

1 The authors acknowledge and appreciate the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer to conduct this analysis.

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