

Gender And Attitude Toward An International Career: A Survey Of Russian Nationals

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines attitudes of Russian MBA students toward international careers and finds that gender is not an issue but that respondents with family constraints were less favorable toward an international career. Respondents who are male, are single, or do not have children were slightly favorable toward international careers. Women and respondents with spouses without a career were neutral toward international careers. Respondents who are married, respondents with children, and respondents with a spouse with a career, were slightly unfavorable toward an international career. The results of this survey indicate that Russian MBA students are, on average, only slightly favorable toward international careers. These results contrast with an earlier study that found a stronger preference for international careers among Russian MBA students. Current MBA students in Moscow have more career opportunities than before. The results are based on the responses of twenty-nine Russian students in an AACSB accredited MBA program in Moscow who speak both Russian and English and work for an international company or agency.

INTRODUCTION

As globalization increases, the supply and demand imbalance regarding global managers becomes a limiting factor in corporate global expansion. Many multinational corporations today face a shortage of managers with the requisite skills and knowledge base to operate in a competitive global environment [Ettore, 1993]. Thus, multinational corporations need to consider all possible candidates for international assignments.

The failure rate among individuals taking an international assignment is high [Black, 1988; Dowling, 1990; and Dunbar and Ehrlich, 1986] as are the costs associated with these failures [Black, 1988 and Wederspahn, 1992]. Firms that do not consider both technical and human relational skills often find the failure rate for international assignees to be quite high [Tung, 1982].

Traditionally, global companies have largely limited the pool of potential candidates for international assignments to men. However, given the shortage of individuals with the skills to operate globally, firms that limit their pool of potential international assignees by systematically excluding part of their workforce from international assignments based on gender are likely eventually to find themselves at a competitive disadvantage.

Adler (1984) identifies a number of perceived reasons why women are not given overseas assignments. One perceived reason is that women do not want overseas assignments because women do not want to relocate themselves or their families. Another perceived reason is that women are not effective in overseas assignments because of foreign prejudices toward women. A third perceived reason is that men are more likely to succeed in an overseas assignment and, therefore, are a less risky investment for the multinational corporation.

While many multinational corporations are re-evaluating corporate policies regarding women and international assignments, the number of female expatriates is still under-represented relative to the total number of female domestic managers [Florakowski and Fogel, 1999]. The “glass ceiling” phenomenon likely explains part of this under-representation. Since international assignments usually involve upper-level positions [Selmer, 2001], if women are under-represented at the upper-level of the corporation, then women are not even in the pool of applicants considered for an international assignment.

Another possible explanation for the low percentage of women in international assignments is that women may be less motivated to accept an international assignment or pursue an international career. The “motivation to pursue” an international career or assignment is based in large part on perceived opportunities and the attractiveness of opportunities. If women do not perceive an international career or an international assignment as attractive, then this perception will be reflected in the attitudes of women toward an international career and assignment.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine gender differences in considering an international career and an international assignment. The survey sample used in this study is a group of Russian MBA students attending an AACSB accredited program given in Moscow, Russia.

The Motivation To Pursue An International Assignment And Career

Stone (1991) in a survey of Australian, expatriate, and Asian managers reports the main criteria used in expatriate selection. The main criteria used in expatriate selection include the desire to serve overseas, technical competence, the ability to adapt, spouse and family adaptability, and human relations skills. Hodgetts and Luthans (2000) argue that the desire to serve overseas is usually not sufficient motivation for assignment to an overseas post. The individual must also believe in the importance of the job and have a sense of mission. Nevertheless, the desire to accept an overseas assignment and by extension to pursue an overseas career is seen as an important determinant in the selection of individuals for an international assignment.

GENDER AND OPPORTUNITY FOR INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS AND CAREERS

A study by Adler (1984) found that although men believe that women are qualified for domestic managerial positions, men tend to believe that women are unqualified for international careers. Adler (1993) found that more than half the companies surveyed hesitated to send women abroad. Almost four times as many firms report reluctance in selecting women for international assignments as report hesitance in promoting women to domestic management positions.

While females account for 30 percent of students in MBA programs, women only represent 14 percent of candidates chosen for foreign postings [Koretz, 1999]. A study by Catalyst (2000) reports that although 49 percent of middle managers are women, only 13 percent achieve expatriate roles. Other studies estimate the number of female expatriates as even lower [Adler, 1993 and West and Leung, 1994].

One reason often given for the lower percentage of females in international assignments is that women will be at a disadvantage working in a foreign country. Three-quarters of the companies surveyed by Adler (1993) stated that foreigners are so prejudiced against women that women would be unable to succeed even if given a foreign assignment. However, this argument ignores facts such as that the present Secretary of State of the United States is female and that the Secretary of State under the previous administration was a female.

Women within a culture are traditionally given a subordinate position in organizations. However, based on the experience of women executives working abroad, female executives are more likely to be accepted than indigenous women [Adler, 1993]. Expatriate women are more likely to be treated first as professionals, then as cultural representatives, and only lastly as women.

Another reason given for the lower percentage of females in international assignments is that women are not as interested in pursuing an international career as men. However, Adler (1986, 1993) found that women MBAs expressed just as much interest in pursuing international careers as men MBAs.

Gender stereotyping can also hinder the career of a female expatriate. A woman, with the same level of talent and performance as a man, is more likely to be under-recognized and under-rewarded [Caligiuri and Cascio, 1998]. This is particularly true when a firm has considerably more men than women in managerial positions [Klenke, 1996].

The internal political climate also plays a part in limiting the careers of females. When managerial positions are disproportionately filled by men, the managerial “club” is dictated by male relationships and male standards of success [Roper, 1996]. Indirectly and directly, the corporate climate can play a part in the international careers of females [Caligiuri and Cascio, 1998].

Attractiveness Of An International Career

Despite increasing globalization and the rising demand for competent international managers, an expatriate faces a unique set of life and career challenges. These challenges are independent of gender. That is, the additional difficulties faced by a manager in a multinational corporation in an overseas assignment, are not dependent on the gender of the expatriate manager.

Managers with families face several additional potential difficulties in overseas assignments. Expatriate managers with spouses and children must overcome these additional problems. Many international assignments which are terminated prematurely are terminated because the spouse or children are unhappy and do not want to remain in the foreign country.

Dual-career couples face their own set of difficulties when one spouse is provided an international assignment opportunity. A significant number of managers reject an overseas assignment opportunity because of the career of their spouse [Harvey and Wiese, 1998]. As the number of dual-career, couples increases, multinational companies will have to find reasonable solutions to this problem or face a diminished pool of willing and qualified candidates for international assignments.

Repatriation is another difficulty facing an individual who accepts an international assignment. These difficulties increase with the duration of the foreign assignment. A study by Tung (1988) reports three major difficulties with repatriation:

- The international assignee is no longer a part of the corporation’s mainstream. In general, he or she becomes part of the “out of sight, out of mind” group.
- Organizational changes may have taken place. These changes may have a negative impact on the returning individual’s position in the company.
- Technological changes may have a negative impact on the value of the returning individual’s existing skills.

How important are international assignments to an individual’s overall career? If the survey of Hambrick and Snow (1989) is representative, the answer is “NOT VERY.” The Hambrick and Snow survey of major US firms found that only six percent believed that a foreign assignment is important for an executive’s overall career. Forty-nine percent reported that foreign assignments are of no value for the careers of executives.

Because of the career difficulties of repatriated executives coupled with a low valuation of foreign assignments for career enhancements, many companies are likely to experience difficulties in finding candidates willing to undertake international assignments [Black, 1991]. This could work to the advantage of women, provided women perceive an overseas assignment an opportunity to advance their careers. A willingness to pursue a path seen by men as less career enhancing could allow women to gain the experience while operating in a less competitive (vis-à-vis men) environment.

Gender And Attitude Toward An International Career: Hypothesis

Women understand that in most workplace organizations, women will experience discrimination. If women are working in a domestic environment, the discrimination will come from domestic sources. If women are working abroad, the discrimination and sexism will likely come from expatriate men, not locals [Westwood and Leung, 1994].

There is little to suggest, either conceptually or empirically, that it is the international dimension which is a primary causal factor affecting any gender differences in motivation. The work culture tends to favor the dominant gender [Klende, 1996]. When women are in the minority in a work group, their performance evaluations tend to be lower than when they are in the majority [Sackett, DuBois, and Wiggins-Noe, 1991]. Domestic workplace dissatisfaction could make an international assignment and career appear more attractive. However, as Hodgetts and Luthans (2000: 436) warn: “Applicants who are unhappy with their current situation at home and are looking to get away seldom make effective overseas managers.”

Borstorff and her associates (1997) identify a number of factors associated with employee willingness to work overseas. None of these factors included gender. Instead such factors as marital status, children, career commitment, and support of spouse and organization were identified as important determinants of the willingness to work overseas. Adler (1986, 1993) addresses the gender issue directly. Adler finds that female MBAs are just as interested in overseas careers as male MBAs. We will test this hypothesis among Russian nationals.

Hypothesis 1: There will not be gender differences in a respondent’s attitude toward an international assignment or an international career.

As an explanation for why some Russian nationals may have a more or less positive attitude toward an international career, we look at the impact that a more complex family situation has on a respondent’s attitude toward an international career. That is, we analyze the impact of marriage, of children, and of a spouse with a career on a respondent’s attitude toward an international career. Marriage may or may not affect a respondent’s attitude toward an international career if the spouse does not have a career. However, children constrain the respondent’s choices and the presence of a working spouse provides further constraints.

Hypothesis 2: Respondents with a spouse will have a less positive attitude toward an international career than respondents who do not have a spouse.

Hypothesis 3: Respondents with children will have a less positive attitude toward an international career than respondents who do not have children.

Hypothesis 4: Respondents with a spouse who has a career will have a less positive attitude toward an international career than respondents who do not have a spouse with a career.

Survey Sample And Results

Our study extends the work reported in Adler (1984). The survey respondents in this study are students in an AACSB accredited MBA program in Moscow that is jointly sponsored by the California State University at Hayward and the Institute of Business and Economics at the National Academy of Economics. The MBA program is a full-time, two-year program where most of the students have full-time jobs for either a multinational company or a government or international agency. The first year of the program is designed to provide students with the basic skills needed for the advance, thirty hour MBA program. The students are all fluent in English, which is the language of instruction for the program.

The students were asked to respond to the statement “I am seriously considering pursuing an international career. The students were offered five possible responses where one indicates that the statement is “very true” and five indicates that the statement is “definitely not” true. A response of three indicates that the student is “neutral” toward the statement. The other two optional responses were “somewhat true” and “probably not” true. Twenty-tree

respondents were male and six respondents were female. The average response for the males was 2.87 or slightly favorable toward an international career and the average response for the females was 3.00 or neutral toward an international career. The Chi² statistic for the non-parametric test of median differences for small samples for the two groups was 0.04 which indicates that there were no statistically significant differences between the responses of the men and women.

Eighteen of the respondents were married and eleven were not married. The average response level for the married respondents was 3.17 indicating that married respondents were slightly unfavorable toward international careers. The average response level of the non-married respondents was 2.58 indicating a slightly favorable attitude toward international careers. The Chi² statistic for the non-parametric test of median differences for small samples for the two groups was 1.10 which indicates that the differences in the responses between the two groups were not statistically significantly different.

Sixteen of the respondents have children and thirteen do not have children. The average response level for the respondents with children was 3.31 indicating that respondents with children were slightly unfavorable toward international careers. The average response level of the respondents with no children was 2.56 indicating a slightly favorable attitude toward international careers. The Chi² statistic for the non-parametric test of median differences for small samples for the two groups was 1.21 which indicates that the differences in the responses between the two groups were not statistically significantly different.

Nine of the respondents have spouses with careers and six have spouses who do not have careers. The average response level for the respondents with spouses who have careers was 3.44 indicating that respondents with spouses with careers slightly unfavorable toward international careers. The average response level of the respondents with spouses who do not have careers was 3.00 indicating a slightly favorable attitude toward international careers. The Chi² statistic for the non-parametric test of median differences for small samples for the two groups was 0.94 which indicates that the differences in the responses between the two groups were not statistically significantly different.

Discussion Of Survey Results

The responses of students to this survey indicate a slightly favorable attitude of Russian MBA students toward international careers. Respondents who are male, single, or with no children were slightly favorable toward international careers. In comments, indications are that respondents would be favorably disposed to international assignments if the assignments are career enhancing. Women and respondents with spouses without a career were neutral toward international careers. Respondents who were married, respondents with children, and respondents with a spouse with a career, were slightly unfavorable toward an international career. In comments, respondents indicated that the main reason not to desire international careers is family obligations. That is, respondents with more complex family situations feel less favorable toward an international career. The results of this survey indicate that Russian MBA students are, on average, only slightly favorable toward international careers. These results contrast with an earlier study by Hietapelto, McGowan, and Moeller (2002) that indicated a much stronger preference for international careers among Russian MBA students. We believe that the more recent students are less favorable toward international careers because career opportunities in Moscow have increased dramatically. Current MBA students in Moscow have more career opportunities in Moscow now than did MBA students eight years ago.

Table 1: Attitudes Toward International Careers

2003		
Male	2.87	23
Female	3.00	6
Total	2.90	29
Chi ²	0.04	
Married	3.17	18
Single	2.58	11
Total	2.90	29
Chi ²	1.10	
Children	3.31	16
No	2.56	13
Total	2.90	29
Chi ²	1.21	
Career Spouse	3.44	9
No	3.00	6
Total	3.27	15
Chi ²	0.94	

I am seriously considering pursuing an international career.		
1	very true	
2	somewhat true	
3	neutral	
4	probably not	
5	definitely not	

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