

Maximising Learning And Development From International Assignments

There is little doubt that many global organisations continue to face challenges in attracting and retaining the quality and quantity of leadership talent they require to deliver on sustainable growth and should be on a global basis. Global mobility has long since represented a key means by which these firms have facilitated the development of global leadership capability in their leadership cohorts. Indeed Cartus' 2014 Trends in Global Relocation Survey found that amongst firms who expected assignee levels to increase over the coming two years, developmental objectives were the key driver for more than 50% of them.

While intuitively the value of international experience in senior leaders is clearly evident, academic research provides empirical support for the positive relationship between top-management team (TMT) international assignment experience and indicators of firm performance, and levels of international diversification. The value of global mobility in leadership development is driven by the expectation that international experiences are central in forming and moulding a talented individual by developing through learning from experiences. Indeed, global assignments are considered to be the most effective means of developing such competencies. The objective of this article is to consider some emerging research evidence that facilitates our understanding of how the value of international assignments can be maximised in terms of learning and development while on assignment.

Cross-Cultural Competencies As The Building Blocks

First and foremost research points to the importance of underlying competencies that predict effective assignee performance and the potential to learn from global experience. Building on a large body of research evidence Caligiuri and Dragoni summarise these competencies in terms of four broad categories. These four sets of cross-cultural competencies focus on the key aspects of performing effectively in the global context. Self-management

competencies address the requirements to internally regulate and manage the complexities and uncertainties of operating in novel cross-cultural environments. Sample competencies include tolerance of ambiguity, cultural curiosity and humility. The second group of competencies, termed relationship-management competencies, are focused on building connections with key stakeholders in the global context. The focus is on effective communication and building trust and credibility with local employees and other stakeholders. Sample competencies include mindful communication skills, perspective taking, and relationship building. Business-management competencies are focused on business strategy. They facilitate

understanding the key elements of both organisational and national culture, and the interconnected system of the context which includes laws, regulations, level of education, and similar factors which impact on doing business globally. Sample competencies include receptivity to diverse ideas, ability to foster innovation, stakeholder influence, and ethical decision-making. Response management competencies represent the final group of competencies identified by Caligiuri and Dragoni. These competencies include cultural adaptation, cultural minimisation and cultural integration. They facilitate understanding the cultural nuances of doing business and how to respond in a way that facilitates the deliver of personal and organisational goals.

Table 1: Cross-Cultural Competencies

Cross-Cultural Competencies	Typical Competencies	These Competencies facilitate...
Self-Management Competencies	Tolerance of ambiguity Cultural curiosity Humility and appropriate self-efficacy	Managing emotional responses in complex and ambiguous cross-cultural environments
Relationship-Management Competencies	Perspective taking Ability to form relationships Mindful communication skills	Connecting with others from different cultures, communicating appropriately, to build trust, and gaining the necessary credibility to lead
Business-Management Competencies	Receptivity to diverse ideas Ability to foster innovation Ability to influence stakeholders Ethical decision-making Ability to network globally	Accounting for the business strategy, the key elements of the culture, and the interconnected system of the context which includes laws, regulations, level of education, and similar factors
Response-Management Competencies	Cultural adaptation Cultural minimisation Cultural integration	Understanding the ultimate professional goal and respond in a manner that will have the intended outcome

Source: Adapted from Caligiuri and Dragoni (2015)

Clearly these competencies are illustrative and any competency profile should reflect the particular organisational content in which they are developed. Broadly however, they can be considered enablers of effective performance and learning in the international arena and should be evaluated in the selection phase.

The Nature Of The Experience Is Key

Once these competencies are in place the nature of the experience gained when on assignment is considered central to the extent of learning while on assignment. Historically, time on assignment was considered a key factor in explaining learning and development. More recent research has however, recognised that time spent on assignment is simply an enabler of bringing about impactful development of global leaders. In this regard, the qualities of the experiences gained while abroad also emerge as significant. Specifically, the extent of cultural difference or the cultural contrasts through which such leaders develop more elaborate cognitive structures that represent more advanced levels of global leadership competence are key. Research confirms that developmental assignments are associated with higher levels of development in assignees. This work confirms that assignments premised on management development, foster personal change and role innovation as the assignee adapts his or her frame of reference in acclimatising to the new environment. This perhaps explains why developmental assignments appear to have greater career-enhancing effects than other forms of assignment.

A central theme in this literature is that international assignments develop individuals more holistically, compared to formal training or more narrow experiences such as international business travel, by exposing them to the challenges of living and working in a foreign country. The significance of high-contact, cross-cultural leadership-development experiences as central in fostering this personal change and role innovation is highlighted in this research. This is reflected in higher levels of peer-level interaction in the novel cultural environment and the practice of newly-learned behaviours in the multi-cultural context, the receipt of feedback, and an emotionally and professionally safe environment where risks can be taken and mistakes can be made. Further, the

more individuals engage in high contact cross-cultural learning experiences, the greater opportunity they have to reproduce and refine the new behaviours for later application.

On balance this literature points to the impact of mastering challenging and complex issues and problems in novel and high-pressure situations combined with the requirement to work in complex and highly-uncertainty conditions, and the need to lead and influence colleagues and other stakeholders with diverse mindsets, ambitions and goals as important drivers of on-the-job learning are key.

Implications For Global Mobility

A better understanding of how international experience facilitates the development of global leadership competencies has implications for the global mobility function in terms of the management of global assignee populations. Clearly, first and foremost, for assignments premised on developmental objectives it seems that selection should include a consideration of an appropriate competency profile. Given that in many organisations global mobility becomes involved in the support process after the assignees has been selected, this reinforces the importance of early intervention of the global mobility function. Broadly the discussion also reinforces the importance of a higher level of integration between global mobility and global talent in facilitating the appropriate sourcing of candidates, career planning and matching of talent to particular roles with a developmental focus. The selection of appropriate roles to maximise the development potential seems key. Support could also focus on helping the assignee to assimilate learning opportunities from the host country and facilitating the application of this knowledge on repatriation. This represents an expanded agenda in terms of support reflecting support beyond that aimed at facilitating performance in role such as cross-cultural training or language support. Similarly, in evaluating the success of international assignments premised on developmental objectives, one should consider broadening the focus from purely work effectiveness and recognise the importance of learning effectiveness. It may be worthwhile to recognise and evaluate the extent to which apparent failures on assignment can also

constitute important learning events. This calls for the effective tracking of return on investment over a longer time period of say three to five years.

Suggested Reading

Caligiuri, P. and Dragoni, L. (2015) 'Global Leadership Development'. In D.G. Collings, G.T. Wood and P.M. Caligiuri (eds) *The Routledge Companion to International Human Resource Management*, New York, Routledge.

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David Collings (PhD) is Professor of HRM at Dublin City University Business School where he leads the HR Directors' Roundtable. He also

Principle Academic Advisor at the Maturity Institute - a global network striving to create vibrant, healthy and successful organisations through maximising the value of people. His research and consulting interests focus on talent management and global mobility. A key focus of his recent work is on understanding how employees add value in organisations and how organisations can support key employee groups, including international assignees, in generating sustainable performance. In 2014, he was named as one of the most influential international thinkers in the field of HR by HR Magazine. His consulting and speaking engagements include multinational companies in Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Middle East and the UK. He has published numerous papers in leading international outlets and edited seven books, most recently *The Routledge Companion to International HRM* with Paula Caligiuri and Geoff Wood.