

In Touch with the Dutch

**A longitudinal study of the impact of a local host on
the success of the expatriate assignment**



Marian van Bakel
Centre for PhD Research
Radboud University Nijmegen
The Netherlands
www.ru.nl/cvp/onderzoek/bakel_van_marian
m.v.bakel@let.ru.nl

Introduction

Due to the high direct and indirect costs of international assignments the literature on the subject gives a great deal of attention to causes of their success or failure. One of the most important causes of expatriate failure is cultural differences. There are many difficulties associated with a cross-cultural transition and one of the ways to deal with these difficulties is to get in touch with nationals of the host country (Brewster & Pickard, 1994; Church, 1982; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Parker & McEvoy, 1993). The present study investigates whether facilitating interaction with host nationals through putting expatriates and their partners in touch with the Dutch helps them deal with the difficulties of their sojourn in the Netherlands. This is especially relevant since Europe, and especially the Netherlands, was found to be the most difficult region to make friends, according to the recent Expat Explorer Survey (HSBC, 2010).

Adjustment and performance

Whether an expatriate is successful does not depend only on his or her job performance, but also on his or her adjustment to the new country. Research shows that this is a central factor for the success of international assignments (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005). However, research into the effectiveness of expatriates often focuses only on adjustment, because it is assumed that this has an impact on expatriate job performance (Mol, Born, & Van der Molen, 2005). For that reason, this study includes both adjustment and performance to get a picture that is as complete as possible of the level of success of the expatriate assignment. Chapter 2 discusses these two concepts in more detail.

The measurement of job performance during an international assignment is complicated “owing to the subjectivity and the diversity of environments, both external as well as internal” (Harvey & Moeller, 2009, p. 283). It also leads to practical issues for researchers. As a result, expatriate performance is usually measured through such criteria as *early return*. As this is an extreme form of failure, another criterion that is often used is *psychological withdrawal* (thoughts and plans to quit the assignment) (Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). This research uses several instruments (*Desire to Terminate the Assignment*, *Assess Own Performance* and *Most Recent Actual Performance Evaluation*) in an attempt to cover the concept of job performance more fully.

With regard to Adjustment the present study uses the two most common models: the ‘Model of the Acculturation process’ (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), frequently used in cross-cultural psychology, and the ‘Framework of International Adjustment’ (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991), which is common in International Human Resource Management. The first model distinguishes two aspects of Adjustment: *Psychological* and *Sociocultural Adjustment*, while the second model contends that Adjustment has three aspects: *General*, *Interaction* and *Work Adjustment*. The effect of contact with a local host is examined for these five Adjustment variables.

Benefits of contact with a local host

Contact with host nationals has several benefits, which are detailed in chapter 3: for example, one is better adjusted to interaction with host nationals (Johnson, Kristof-Brown, Van Vianen, De Pater, & Klein, 2003) and to the new environment (Brewster & Pickard, 1994). The above mentioned Model of the Acculturation Process (Ward et al., 2001) shows that there are two ways in which contact with a local host can contribute to the success of the international assignment. Interaction with host nationals could help expatriates and partners to learn about the cultural rules and conventions of the host country. Host nationals could also provide social support when expatriates and partners face the challenge of rebuilding their social network upon arrival in the host country. Finally, contact with a local host might also benefit the organisation itself if the local host fulfils some of the Host Country National Liaison roles (Vance, Vaiman, & Andersen, 2009) and thereby facilitates effective knowledge management. It is advisable for organisations to encourage their

expatriates to get in touch with host nationals. This, however, is not always easy. Contact with a local host is a way in which this barrier can be overcome.

Research questions

This longitudinal study examined whether contact with a local host had a positive impact on the success of the international assignment of Western expatriates and their partners with English or French as their first language in the Netherlands. The first research question is:

RQ1 Does contact with a local host contribute to the success of an expatriate assignment?

The analyses with regard to this first research question pertained to four concepts: Adjustment, Performance, Social Support and Intercultural Communication Competence. In chapter 3 hypotheses and research questions are formulated – for each concept – and their theoretical bases examined.

Furthermore, the present study combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explore how to improve such an intervention in such a way that a local host can contribute optimally to expatriate success:

RQ2 To what extent does quality of contact between expatriate, partner and local host have an effect on the success of the expatriate assignment?

RQ3 Which aspects promote high quality contact between expatriate, partner and host?

Methodology

The methodology of this study is outlined in chapter 4. The main study was a randomised controlled experiment to examine the longitudinal effects of contact with a local host (RQ1): thirty-three expatriates, of whom ten with partner, were put in touch with a Dutch host with whom they had contact for a period of nine months (experimental group); another thirty-two expatriates, of whom thirteen with partner, did not have contact with a host (control group). Assignment to experimental conditions was randomised and at baseline level, after five and nine months expatriates and partners filled in a questionnaire. This questionnaire contained validated instruments that measured adjustment, performance, social support and intercultural communication competence. The local host was a family, a single person or a couple with whom the expatriate and partner undertook a great variety of activities, from dinner or drinks to more touristic activities such as visiting a whiskey brewery, a local town or even walking the mudflats in the north of the Netherlands.

Qualitative methodology was added to gain more insight into the phenomenon under study (RQ2 and RQ3): open-ended questions about the contact with the host were added to the questionnaires, and interviews were held with ten expatriates, four partners and five hosts. Eight partners and three expatriates of the experimental group kept a weekly diary throughout the project. The researcher kept in touch with the host on a regular basis to enquire how the contact was going; these emails were also taken into account in the qualitative analyses.

Does a local host matter?

With the first research question the study examined whether contact with a local host had an impact on Adjustment, Performance, Social Support and Intercultural Communication Competence (RQ1). A local host had an impact on all except Performance, suggesting that contact with a local host primarily affected the private domain.

First, a local host increased the comfort expatriates and partners felt with interacting with host nationals (*Interaction Adjustment*), this was especially marked for expatriates if they did not have

a partner. No effect of a local host was found for the other Adjustment variables (*Psychological Adjustment, Sociocultural Adjustment, General Adjustment and Work Adjustment*).

Second, with regard to Social Support, a local host buffered a decrease on access to host nationals (*Host National Access*) for female expatriates, and expatriates with a host received more social support from host nationals (*Host National Social Support*) than expatriates without host. Also, it was possible for a local host to become a strong tie, a friend, for both expatriates and partners (*Friendship*), and the long term potential of contact with a local host was shown in the fact that about one third of expatriates in the experimental group kept in contact with their host for at least two years (*Contact Maintenance*).

Third, a local host affected all three aspects of Intercultural Communication Competence: knowledge (*Knowledge*), attitude (*Openmindedness*) and two of the (personality-based) intercultural skills (*Social Initiative* and *Emotional Stability*). Expatriates and partners were able to learn about Dutch culture from their host (*Knowledge*). In addition, a local host buffered a decrease both with regard to *Openmindedness* and *Social Initiative*, although in the case of *Openmindedness* only for expatriates with partner. With regard to *Emotional Stability*, contrary to the expectations, partners *without* host increased on this variable, whereas those *with* host remained stable.

These findings suggest that contact with a local host is not a panacea for all the difficulties faced by expatriates and partners on international assignments, but that it might be particularly useful, for example, for expatriates who have to deal with host national colleagues and clients on a day-to-day basis.

Only limited effect of a local host was found for the partners of expatriates. This might be due to the fact that the intervention was designed with the expatriate specifically in mind, so that it might have been less effective for partners of expatriates. An important difference between expatriates and partners was that the partners in this research did not have a job, which means that they might benefit more from contact with a local host if it could (also) take place during the day. Another possible explanation for the lack of effect is that a possible effect might not have reached significance due to the small sample size ($N = 23$).

Does the quality of the contact matter?

Second, the study examined the role of the quality of the contact between expatriates and hosts (RQ2), which is the subject of chapter 6. Expatriates who were put in touch with a host were divided into two groups based on their experiences: 21 expatriates developed high quality contact with their host, whereas for 12 expatriates the contact was of low quality. This research question was answered only for expatriates, because the group of partners was too small.

The study showed that the quality of contact played a role in the impact of a local host on the expatriate assignment (*Interaction Adjustment, Host National Social Support, Friendship, Knowledge, Openmindedness* en *Social Initiative*). Although the data did not permit drawing firm conclusions as to the exact role of the quality of the contact due to the small sample size of the groups with high and with low quality contact, it seemed that in most of the cases in which a local host had an impact, contact quality had a linear relationship with the success of the expatriate assignment: the higher the quality of the contact, the more benefit the expatriate experienced. Moreover, expatriates with low quality contact did not experience a detrimental effect, suggesting that contact with a local host is a low-risk intervention.

Catalysts and barriers

Third, the qualitative study explored which elements were important for the formation of high quality contact (RQ3). Chapter 7 discusses seven catalysts (similarity, motivation, enriching contact, benefits with regard to adjustment and social support, proximity and research context) and six barriers (anxiety, different expectations, busy schedules, suboptimal timing, communication

breakdown and cultural differences) that had an impact on the development of the contact between expatriate, partner and host.

To gain more insight into which factors override others, the four cases with highest quality contact and the four with lowest quality contact were described in more detail. The analyses suggest that it is worthwhile to establish some similarity between participants in a matching procedure, although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly which aspects are essential in this respect. Age and family situation seem to be relevant starting points, as well as some similar interests so that participants have some common ground on which to build a relationship. Also, it is recommended to match expatriates and partners to a host who lives close by, as this makes it easier to meet and results in higher quality contact. In addition, it is advisable to make sure the expatriate and partner are willing to make an effort because it could help overcome potential barriers to the contact such as busy schedules; this willingness is not self-evident even if participation is voluntary. Involving expatriates and partners in the timing of the contact with the host could also be useful so that it is established when the expatriate and partner think they would benefit most from the contact. It could also be helpful to discuss expectations of the contact with the expatriate, the partner and host before they are put in touch with each other. Moreover, benefits experienced by expatriates and partners during the contact – for example social support – are an important stimulant because this could encourage them to invest more in the contact.

Conclusion and discussion

Chapter 8 discusses the results of the study presented in chapters 5-7 in the light of the theories dealt with in chapters 1-3, together with limitations and suggestions for future research.

The results of this study showed that a local host mainly had an impact on the affective aspects of the expatriate assignment – an expectation on the basis of the stress and coping model – although also some culture learning took place. The findings were partly in line with what was expected on the basis of the literature (for example that contact with host nationals predicts interaction adjustment (Johnson et al., 2003)), but also suggested that findings of the effect of comparable interventions are not always applicable to contact with a local host. For example where some studies of mentoring or peer pairing for international students found an effect on performance-related outcomes (e.g. Carraher et al., 2008; Westwood & Barker, 1990), no such effect was found for a local host.

Contact with a local host is a way in which organisations can support their expatriates and partners, especially with regard to interaction with host nationals, provision of social support, knowledge about the host country, and to counteract a tendency to become less openminded and less socially active. As the benefits occurred in the private domain, organisations should not expect the intervention – as designed in the present study – to impact on expatriate job performance.

Practical implications

Chapter 9 highlights the practical implications of this study for organisations, expatriates and their partners. As expatriates with high quality contact seemed to benefit more from the contact than expatriates with low quality contact with regard to *Interaction Adjustment*, *Host National Social Support*, *Friendship*, *Knowledge*, *Openmindedness* and *Social Initiative*, organisations should aim to stimulate the quality of the contact between expatriates, partners and hosts. This might be done, for example, through careful matching that takes similarities between expatriates, partners and their hosts into account and by discussion of expectations, but also through preparing participants and monitoring the contact. Also, it is advisable to involve participants in the timing of the contact because of individual preferences. The dissertation ends with practical recommendations for expatriates and their partners, such as the importance of taking the initiative and perseverance when setting up a new social network in the Netherlands, to help them maximise the success of the expatriate assignment through getting in touch with the locals.