Exploring the Overseas Experience of Filipino Employees Working Abroad: A Qualitative Study on Cross Cultural Adjustment

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Abstract

Globalization has changed the way nations interact, bringing opportunities for intercultural interaction and overseas expansion; however, this also subjects individuals to the challenges of adjusting to and surviving in a foreign environment. To understand the factors affecting adjustment experienced by expatriates, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were carried out on seven Filipino employees who worked in Japan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, India, South Korea, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates to answer the main research question, *"What key factors contribute to the cross-cultural adjustment of Filipino employees working overseas"?* Prior to working overseas, the respondents prepared for their assignments by managing work and culture-related expectations, and undergoing formal and informal cross-cultural training. As such, they expressed that cross-cultural training is important because it teaches the individual to avoid conflict, and to become more culturally sensitive and aware. During their overseas assignment, the respondents experienced challenges in cross-cultural adjustment because of language and communication barriers, cultural differences, work-related cultural differences, and homesickness. To address the challenges and adjust to the culture overseas, they sought social support, learned the host country's language, engaged in Internet-based learning, used their proficiency in English, and accepted the culture of the host country. Lastly, after returning to the Philippines at the end of their assignment, the respondents experienced changes in the way they view the Philippines, and their jobs and professions. Likewise, they experienced personal growth, as well as an increase in credibility among their colleagues.

Globalization has changed the way individuals in the workplace interact, influencing society, politics, economics, and even the demographics of employees in an organization (Earley, Ang, & Tan, 2006). While there is no concrete description to the ever-developing concept of globalization, Mourdoukoutas (2011) defined it as the growing mutual interaction, communication, and dependency of local and foreign bodies. Furthermore, globalization is the integration of nations, peoples, and cultures, and the breaking down of barriers connected to goods, services, knowledge, and wealth across borders (Eisenberg, Goodall & Trethewey, 2007, as cited in Truax, 2008). In the context of businesses and organizations, globalization would mean expanded markets, more affordable resources, economic interaction, and consumer convenience; however, it also runs the risk of greater competition, and poor market analysis, which translates to a drop in sales and negative company image (Tan, 2006).

According to Taylor (2000), successful organizations know how to operate in a global marketplace, and through their participation in the international business scene, they are able to realize the importance and essence of understanding the culture of other nations. It is in understanding how one phenomenon affects people across cultures that organizations are able to adapt and improve alongside their international counterparts in the competitive marketplace (Taylor, 2000); however, before understanding may be reached, organizations and individuals run the risk of experiencing difficulties brought about by culture shock that stems from working in a culturally foreign environment (Levine et al., 2007, as cited in Truax, 2008).

In this regard, expatriate workers, or individuals who live and work outside of their home country for a specific period of time (Ronny, Rickard, & Tuyet-Tu, 2007), play an important role in international and cross-cultural development. During international assignments, expatriates experience challenges ranging from socialization with foreign

colleagues, to adjusting in a culturally different work environment; likewise, there are challenges related to cultural diversity and distance, and the influence of local norms and practices on leadership and management. In part, the difficulties faced during international assignments are caused by organizations choosing expatriates based only on their work experience and technical expertise. Their international experience, interpersonal skill, and ability to adapt in a culturally foreign environment are often disregarded (Cooper, 2011).

These challenges expose expatriates to situations that would affect and damage their relationships, not only with work colleagues, but also with locals they interact with on a daily basis during their assignment. Likewise, organizations face the effects of poor integration of their employees overseas through early returns from assignments, as well as negative corporate image brought about by misunderstandings and miscommunication (Cooper, 2011). To address this problem, cross-cultural training is advocated as a way of bridging the gap between cultures by teaching expatriates important information that they could use during their overseas assignment. Furthermore, it helps the individual become more familiar with the foreign culture, and this would help them manage their expectations and interactions during their overseas assignment (Mendenhall, Dunbar, & Oddou, 1987).

Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture

This study follows Hofstede's (1993) definition of culture as the thinking that distinguishes one group from another, which was derived from his study of 64 national subsidiaries of International Business Machines across the globe. He emphasizes on culture being a social construct, saying that it can be inferred from statements and behaviors. Furthermore, he explains that culture is intangible but leaves an impact on the minds of the individuals in a society (Hofstede, 1993).

Hofstede pointed out that the Philippines' main defining feature as a society is collectivism, otherwise known as *bayanihan* (as cited in Selmer and De Leon, 2003), or the sense of belonging in a group who share the same plane of references. Other features include *amor propio*,

which is saving one's self from loss of social attachment; *pakikisama*, which was based on the concept of the aforementioned bayanihan, or the fostering of camaraderie and sense of involvement; and, *utang na loob,* or owing someone a favor, which banks on the idea of reciprocity (Selmer and De Leon, 2003).

These traits, although present before the Philippines was occupied by foreign powers, became more defined and concrete during the era of Spanish occupation. Because of several foreign occupations in the space of almost four centuries, Filipinos give off the impression of being highly influenced by Western practices and principles; however, in reality, Filipinos still stay true to the management styles influenced by indigenous Filipino values. Giving importance to family or kinship was a predominant feature in indigenous Filipinos, but it was made stronger by the influence of Spanish Christianity. In addition, Filipinos have developed a strong sense of family even in the workplace, and family connections are relied on, as influenced by Chinese mercantilism (Selmer and De Leon, 2003).

As managers, Filipinos practice a great deal of respect towards their peers, regardless of rank and status. Because of the concept of *hiya* or shame, Filipinos practice great restraint not to bring a situation to conflict, mainly to save face, and aggression is kept to a minimum because of a Filipino's regard for the other person's face, regardless of their personal connection. In addition, Filipinos are more soft-hearted than their Western counterparts, and what may seem like constructive criticism and evaluation to the Westerners can seem like an insult to Filipinos. Even the most objective of feedback can cause loss of face for Filipinos, and criticism is equated to shame and embarrassment for them. Finally, Filipinos have the habit of being reluctant to say no, as they see it as a negative reflection of their ability to act upon anything, and would say yes when really implying the opposite (Selmer and De Leon, 2003).

According to Gonzales (as cited in Selmer and De Leon, 2013), cultural values that Filipinos have acquired over time are greatly reflected in their managerial styles. A typical Filipino manager would be

people-oriented, and would prefer keeping good interpersonal relations with their subordinates, fellow workers, managers, supervisors, and even those who are competing against them, to seeing them as a means towards a goal. In the office, there would often be a mixture of personal matters in conversations of the business nature, as well as the mixture of pleasure and duties, and social communication with work interaction. Often, this would result in employee confusion, and they would often be unable to differentiate discussions of the personal kind, from that of the business kind (Selmer and De Leon, 2003).

Finally, Western managers plan and organize their work around organization systems and production equipment available; on the other hand, Filipino managers would view systems and equipment simply as means of furthering their employees' innate capability to work, and extending their potential in the workplace (Selmer and De Leon, 2003).

Research Questions

This study explored the overseas experience of seven Filipino employees who worked in Japan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, India, South Korea, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates, addressing the main question: *"What key factors contribute to the cross-cultural adjustment of Filipino employees working overseas"?* Specifically, it answered the following questions:

1. What are the strategies employed by the participants in preparation for their overseas travel?;
2. What is the importance of cultural training in relation to cultural adjustment overseas as viewed by the participants?;
3. What are the challenges, problems, and difficulties faced by participants during their overseas assignment?;
4. What are the strategies employed by participants to enhance cultural adjustment during their overseas assignment?; and
5. What are the changes experienced by participants after returning from their overseas assignment?

The qualitative, inductive approach was taken to yield rich and in-depth narratives from participants. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with seven participants using purposive sampling. Participants met predetermined criteria, which were as follows: they must 1) have experience working overseas, whether by company assignment or personal means and 2) have returned to the Philippines. A total of 25 who fit the criteria were sent an email invitation to participate in the study; ten accepted. However, due to scheduling conflicts and other constraints, only seven were able to confirm their participation.

Of the seven participants who were interviewed for the research, one is female and six are male, with ages ranging from 22 to 54. The participants were from the fields of engineering and construction, information technology and programming, education and research, consumer electronics, and sports.

The interviews were conducted primarily in English and Filipino, and lasted from 40 minutes to an hour. All the respondents consented to having the interview recorded. The data were immediately processed and transcribed after being gathered, with the categorization of common themes being the objective.

Results and Discussion

Cross cultural adjustment, as defined by Black (1990), is the capacity of an individual to feel psychological comfort, and to reduce uncertainty in a foreign environment by learning appropriate behavior from locals and adapting it into their interactions.

In creating a framework for cross cultural adjustment, Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou (1991) considered the multi-faceted nature of cross cultural adjustment, and identified three dimensions of adjustment: 1) *general adjustment*, or degree to which an individual can adjust to the culture of the host country such as food, climate, weather, housing, healthcare, and cost of living; 2) *work adjustment*, which involves job expectations, roles, and new working environment; and 3) *interaction*

adjustment, which pertains to the level of comfort an individual feels when communicating with a host country national.

Pre-Departure Preparation: Managing Expectations

Having accurate expectations of the overseas assignment is an important factor in the process of cross-cultural adjustment experienced by an expatriate. Accurate expectations translate to reduction of anxiety and uncertainty, and this would result in less culture shock and faster adjustment (Black et al., 1991). The respondents gave two types of expectations: *work related expectations* and *culture related expectations.*

According to Quinto and Perez (2004), the primary reason why Filipinos choose to work overseas is the destabilization of the economy, causing a significant increase in the cost of basic commodities, which presents a greater need to find jobs which would yield greater *financial rewards*:

> *The typical starting salary [in Singapore] is SGD2000; that's around PHP70000 here in the Philippines. They're earning seventy thousand there, and us here in the Philippines, our salary is fifteen thousand. (IN3-SG)*

> *At the time, Saudi was the largest oil producing country other than Iran, so one can expect that the financial rewards would be good. (IN2-SA)*

> *I was looking for greener pasture… I wasn't looking for challenge, I just know I'll earn more without having to do a difficult job. I was receiving 70K here in the Philippines, but in Dubai, I was offered 15K Dirhams, so that's around 250K a month without tax. (IN7-UAE)*

The organization's considerations towards assigning employees overseas, recruitment and selection systems in particular, are also indicators of successful expatriate assignment. It is assumed that the closer an individual's skills and traits are to the requirements of the company, the better their adjustment would be (Black et al., 1991).

As such, *role clarity*, or understanding the work-related tasks required overseas, helped one respondent minimize work-related difficulties:

> *Before the trip, we knew what to do because we talked about it before we left…we had Skype calls, <u>we agreed on what we need to do</u>, what the plan is. (IN4-IND)*

> *There are certain expectations by the UN (employer) that are project-based. You follow a rigid schedule, there's no flexibility in the job assignments. At the same time, I was expected to deliver my requirements at a scheduled time. (IN6-THA)*

Finally, having expectations of the *culture* of their destination is a way of coping with cultural differences, a challenge faced by expatriates during their overseas assignment. Specifically, they experience dissonance when encountering foreign practices and beliefs (Dowling et al., 2008):

> *<u>When we travel to Asian countries, more or less we know what to expect</u>. Neighboring Asian countries, usually we have the same culture. It's really a big change when you travel or when you have another set of people coming from Europe, so you can expect that it's somehow totally different. (IN1-JPN)*

Pre-Departure Preparation: Cross-Cultural Training

Cross-cultural training is one of the most effective means of achieving successful cross-cultural adjustment, which helps the individual become more familiar with the culture of their host country. This results in less culture shock and decreased anxiety (Black and Mendenhall, 1990). Most of the respondents underwent cultural training either formal or informal, prior to their assignment.

Formal training, or training done in an official classroom setting headed by a qualified trainer (Cross, 2007), may either be mandated by

the organization or government, or self-initiated by the expatriate. Some respondents underwent trainings or seminars before being allowed to work overseas:

> *Prior to contract signing, <u>there were one or two sessions before you leave where they would brief you on what to expect, what not to do,</u> specifically though, on not what to do. (IN2-SA)*

> <u>*Briefing and workshop seminars for almost a week*</u>*. In this case, in Thailand, the training was more in-depth. That means learning the language, the dialects, what would be the right term for certain gender based languages. You have orientation of sorts. (IN6-THA)*

> *We have PDOS (Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar) focusing mostly on what not to do in the Middle East. (IN7-UAE)*

Other respondents gathered information from the Internet and other means. This can be better labeled as *informal training*, or the learning experienced by an individual in a non-classroom setting (Cross, 2007):

> <u>*There was no training, just the Internet*</u>*. I just read examples online. I also asked around, like the sign language [non-verbal communication], because I learned that it's different from one country to another. (IN3-SG)*

The respondents further discussed the significance of cultural training with respect to their experience working overseas, with conflict avoidance, and cultural sensitivity and awareness being two important reasons.

Conflict avoidance is a major strategy that others-oriented and collectivist countries like the Philippines employ during cross-cultural encounters (Hofstede, 1993). Some respondents discussed how it helped them avoid being offensive to the locals whom they worked with:

So that you can fit in? You'd know if you can fit the society when you enter it. It's also for your adjustment, so you won't do anything illegal or offensive. (IN5-SKOR)

You won't get shocked because you get to learn of the different behaviors of the people there. You're dealing with different people, right? It's important to know what not to do, for example, what their dislikes are. Of course, you wouldn't want to offend. (IN7-UAE)

Cross-cultural training is also essential in increasing *cultural sensitivity and awareness*, which would guide individuals in a diverse environment understand how cultures impact action and behavior, thus enabling them to improve relationships and interactions (Holt, 2014):

It's very, very important because that's the only way for you to become aware, other than Internet. Your knowledge is limited, other that the briefings and seminars relative to the cultural background of Saudi. Also, being aware and knowing how to go about the culture. (IN2-SA)

Brislin and Yoshida (1994) explained that cultural training places emphasis on the differences between cultures, in that some behaviors appropriate to some culture may be completely offensive to others, and awareness of these differences is the first step to becoming successful in the international assignment. In addition, people respond negatively when faced with problems in an unfamiliar cultural environment. Overcoming emotional challenges is also crucial in achieving intercultural success, as it has an immense effect on the mental and physical health of the expatriate. As such, cultural training is important because it reduces the emotional stress brought about by lack of information and cultural knowledge (Brislin and Yoshida, 1994).

During Overseas Assignment: Language/Communication Barriers

Language is an integral part of an individual's identity. It enables them to convey messages and communicate with other individuals, which makes it an important factor in interaction

adjustment during cultural adjustment (Black et al., 1991). According to Selmer (2006), communication is crucial to management because it is both a cause of inclusion and exclusion. Furthermore, culture is communication, and by extension, communication is culture. As such, language barriers would limit the individual's cultural adjustment, and would cause further uncertainty and anxiety (Selmer, 2006)

Respondents expressed difficulties in communicating with their co-workers overseas, either because they could not understand the language being spoken by locals, or because of the different levels of English fluency that they and the locals had. This greatly affected their interpersonal relationships or job performance during their assignment:

> *First, <u>it's really communication</u>. There was a time, the first two weeks, I was really a loner. I couldn't talk to anybody else but my trainer/professor. (IN1-JPN)*

> *Not everyone [can understand]. The engineers, yes, they can understand, but they have accent. Accent is a big thing…our project got really messed up because <u>the Chinese workers, they couldn't understand</u>. (IN3-SG)*

Likewise, even between fluent speakers, there are cases where lack of common vocabulary can cause misunderstanding, and this may result in deceit or discord (Selmer, 2006), which was reflected in the experience of one respondent:

> *He said, "Someone died"! There's someone who committed suicide. Instead of saying that someone committed 'suicide,' he said, "Oh, he committed 'sausage'"! Those kinds of instances. … English is not our first language, too, but we're used to it as if it was our own. It's already an official language. <u>Compared to them, our understanding of English is on a different level, so in that aspect, it was difficult for me</u>. (IN5-SKOR)*

Also deeply ingrained in language and culture is humor, which is a powerful speech act used in building relationships between

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individuals, but the context of what is "funny" is deemed highly personal and culture-specific, making it a difficult start-off point for cultural adjustment (Reimann, 2010). In Reimann's (2010) study of Japanese students learning English, he learned that language, along with cultural differences, are the greatest limitations to humor, which follows why non-verbal comedies like Mr Bean are better received by a wider range of audiences.

During Overseas Assignment: Cultural Differences

According to Ghemawat and Reiche (2011), cultural differences between the home and host country of an expatriate are difficult to determine and measure, but are important to learn about to avoid conflict, strains in interaction, and decline in work performance. This sentiment was clearly reflected in the answers given by the respondents, as they expressed that cultural differences were deterrent in their cross-cultural adjustment.

Differences in *national culture* became a source of discomfort for the respondents during their assignment, specifically for those who worked in countries that are fundamentally different from the Philippines. National cultures are the norms, attitudes, rules, values, and beliefs held by the citizens of a certain country (Hofstede, 1993):

> *In the Philippines, we're free. We can exercise the freedom that you enjoy now. You can dress up, you can speak out, you can say things about your colleague, but in Saudi, you're restricted. Also, they can pick you up anytime they want to even without proper reasoning. (IN2-SA)*

> *It's not easy to break cultural barriers. Being a non-Thai talking to a Thai, it's not easy to draw from them the experience, especially if it's a sensitive topic like violence. It's cultural. As much as I want to probe, I cannot. (IN6-THA)*

> *At first, I thought it was easy to adapt. But as you go along, the longer you stay there, you would really see the true personalities of these*

foreigners. *You would get to know them better, and you would get shocked…rather than meeting my expectations that I can get along with them, the longer I stayed there, the more I realized that it wasn't easy. (IN3-SG)*

In the context of cross-cultural adjustment, individual personality plays a significant part, in which a person with greater agreeableness and greater extraversion would fare better in their general adjustment among locals, as they tend to be more open-minded, imaginative, and non-judgmental (Ramalu, et al., 2010).

Likewise, the *local environment* also played part in their adjustment, with one respondent expressing discontent in the country where they were assigned:

In India, there's a part of the city that's like Makati, then next to it is like Tondo, only five levels lower. It smells, it's dirty, and there were a lot of informal settlers…there's an Old Delhi and a New Delhi. In Old Delhi, there are a lot of tourist spots, but there are also homeless people everywhere. In New Delhi, it's like Makati or BGC. (IN4-IND)

Cost of living was also a deterrent in the adjustment of the respondent from Singapore, and even with drastic adjustments to his lifestyle when he moved overseas, it ultimately became one of the reasons for his return to the Philippines:

You may be earning a lot of money, but you can't spend anything because it's too expensive there. Here, you work hard, you play hard. There, you have to save money, you have to cook for yourself because the food is too expensive. If you can't do that, if you can't change your lifestyle, it's useless because you would spend so much of your salary on their expensive food alone. (IN3-SG)

Finally, *food* was named a factor in the adjustment experienced by expatriates, and although it was not to an extreme extent, they still deemed it worth mentioning during the interview:

I noticed something. <u>Their taste in food are extremes</u>. Their sweets are really sweet, their spicy food is really spicy. It makes the food in the Philippines taste bland in comparison. (IN4-IND)

During Overseas Assignment: Work-Related Cultural Difference

Cultural differences present a big challenge in terms of interaction between host country locals and the expatriates. In a workplace setting though, the implication is pronounced because of their effect on job performance, as well as the performance of the team as a whole. Furthermore, despite working in the same organizations, differences in national culture outweigh organizational culture, which also presents a negative outcome on the expatriate (Ghemawat and Reiche, 2011).

A majority of the respondents, despite performing the same jobs in their country of assignment, still experienced difficulty when interacting with fellow employees of different nationalities because of the influence of national culture to the behaviors that they bring to the workplace:

I learned that Filipinos are really like this, they render overtime. As long as they need to finish something, they would deliver, even if it would take them until the morning. To them, when the clock chimes 5 o'clock, <u>they would go home, regardless of how important their jobs are.</u> (IN7-UAE)

<u>The Chinese, they're a bit greedy</u>. They feel like if you're their employee, they could work you to the bone. If they find out you know how to do something, they would make you do it, unlike here in the Philippines, when you know something, you would show off to your boss because it's a way for you to excel or get promoted. There, it's different. <u>You hide what you know so they won't take advantage of you.</u> (IN2-SG)

During Overseas Assignment: Homesickness

The respondents, having worked outside of the Philippines for a period of time, named homesickness as one of the biggest challenges of being assigned overseas. Homesickness, as defined by Van Tillburg, Vingerhoets, and Van Heck (1999; as cited in Christidou, 2013), is the "commonly experienced state of distress among those who have left their house and home and find themselves in a new and unfamiliar environment."

> *Your enemy there is really homesickness. More than my family, what I missed most is the Philippines…I thought I could survive in Singapore, but that's not the case. It's really different in the Philippines. (IN3-SG)*

> *Away from the Philippines, your main concern would be homesickness, being some 8,000km away from your family and loved ones. (IN2-SA)*

> *I also get homesick. I told myself that I would backstroke the ocean [because I miss my family]. Especially when someone back home gets sick, like when one of my kids was sent to the hospital. (IN7-UAE)*

Homesickness is described by the literature as one of the biggest sources of stress for expatriates, and this may even cause physical, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional problems during the overseas assignment, which would affect their interpersonal interactions and work performance (Brunero, et al., 2008).

Achieving Cultural Adjustment: Receiving Social Support

Social support is viewed as a main contributor to the cultural adjustment of an expatriate (Araujo, 2011). Based on the answers given by the participants, two types of social support emerged: *instrumental support* and *socio-emotional support*.

Instrumental support refers to the help extended by either co-foreigners or host country nationals that would reduce uncertainty regarding cultural differences, as well as be a source of information and

aid (Bergstrom, 2010). As the respondent from Japan discussed, they were able to use the support they received during their respective jobs overseas:

> *I befriended the Japanese. It won't really help if you're in a foreign land, you're in another country, and you would just keep to your own culture…you have to be open-minded, you have to meet friends. This is important, you have to interact…because of that, I learned from them, they shared secrets with me. That's what you get when you become closer with other people. Secrets of work. You get plusses, you get additional information, and you get additional styles of doing things. (IN1-JPN)*

Socio-emotional support, on the other hand, mainly battles the loneliness experiences by sojourners in their overseas assignment (Bergstrom, 2010). In particular, the respondent from the UAE found support in the company of their fellow Filipinos:

> *It's a good thing that I had a support group. My friends were also working there…the people I live with, they're also Filipinos, I pay them every week so they would include me when they cook meals. (IN7-UAE)*

Achieving Cultural Adjustment: Learning the Host Country's Language

According to Bergstrom (2010), an individual can be more effective in their interaction with host country nationals if they are able to communicate using verbal and non-verbal means, which also improves their cultural knowledge and understanding. Selmer (2006) likewise emphasized the importance for expatriates to learn the basics of the host-country language as it shows a message they are making an effort to better understand the local culture.

A majority of the respondents expressed that reaching a certain level of familiarity with the local language made a significant impact on their adjustment in their respective host countries:

When I studied the language, it was like a win-win situation. They wanted to get the accent that I had, to get the level of English proficiency we have as Filipinos. Likewise, I wanted to study Korean. The longer I was there, the longer we became friends, we all became better. I became more fluent in Korean, they became more fluent in English, so we now talk in Konglish. (IN5-SKOR)

Achieving Cultural Adjustment: Internet-based Learning

There are other factors that contribute to the increase in cultural knowledge, and technology makes cultural learning more accessible to the expatriates. This creates an alternative learning environment for the expatriate without the added complications of interpersonal communication (Parrish and Linder-Van Berschot., 2010):

Internet is very important, because from there, I learned important know-how, what not to do, what is considered inappropriate in other cultures. It may be that it's okay for us, but it's appropriate to other people, so you need to study that by way of researching, reading. (IN7-UAE)

Achieving Cultural Adjustment: Fluency in English

According to Yeh and Inose (2003, as cited in Araujo, 2011), English proficiency is a significant component in the cultural adjustment of foreigners. Furthermore, Lu, Samaratunge, and Hartel (2015) stated that fluency in English increases the ability of an expatriate worker to increase cultural knowledge about the home country or the workplace, even in non-English speaking countries. It is perceived as a key element in acculturation, and provides the individual with a sense of belonging and confidence (Lu, et al., 2015). As some respondents expressed:

We can write and we can talk in English. That's our advantage…we're very interactive, that's why they [foreigners] like the Filipinos so much because we say how we feel. And we're good in English. (IN6-THA)

> *On a professional level, there's no problem. <u>Filipinos have the facility to converse in English so we can communicate with people</u>. (IN7-UAE)*

Achieving Cultural Adjustment: Accepting the Culture

A way to achieve cultural competence is to acknowledge and understand that diversity exists, and that acceptance of a foreign culture is important to truly adjust and adapt (Delano, 2004). A majority of the respondents was accepting of the differences in culture between the Philippines and the country where they worked, but the respondents from Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Dubai, in particular, emphasized that the only way to deal with the differences is to accept the culture, rules, and beliefs of their respective host countries:

> *For a time, your knees would tremble, but as you go along, you would realize that there's a reason why that would happen. And since you're not doing anything wrong, as long as you follow the rules of the Kingdom and your company, you won't have any problems. But of course, you can't remove the fear. <u>But that's how it goes. You just get used to it.</u> (IN2-SA)*

> *Singapore's strictness, <u>you're just going to have to accept it</u> while you're in their country. (IN3-SG)*

> *<u>That's how it is. "When in Rome, do what the Romans do".</u> You really need it, you shouldn't be rigid. <u>You also have to acclimatize yourself to the culture</u>, otherwise, you're not supposed to be there. (IN7-UAE)*

In Chang's (1997) study on American and Japanese expatriates, difficulty accepting the country's norms and culture is one of the major challenges in cultural adjustment, along with the difficulty of their spouse's adjustment in the host country, and their difficulty coping with work-related challenges as employees, which often lead to failure of expatriation.

Post-Overseas Assignment: Appreciation of the Philippines

After their overseas experience, the respondents began to regard their home country in a different light. Likewise, after having worked with people from different nationalities, they were able to re-evaluate how they view the Filipino people. As the respondent from India put it:

> *I was thankful, because in comparison, the Philippines is really okay. India is also Third World, right? You will really love the cleanliness and smell of the Philippines. The cars there are wild, and it's noisy in the streets…I learned a lot. I also appreciated the Philippines more. I am also happy that we don't have a caste system, because if you're born in a lower caste, you won't be able to do anything. (IN4-IND)*

Post-Overseas Assignment: Appreciation of Their Work/Profession

Not only did they develop an appreciation for the Philippines, but they were also able to appreciate the fields of work they are in, and learn from the experience that they had during their work overseas. Similarly, those who felt discontent with their job in the Philippines were able to value it more because they were able to see how different it was overseas:

> *Your love for work went several notches higher…you felt a sense of being privileged to be working with other expatriates and having the time of your life, what with sharing your and their wits towards the completion of projects assigned. (IN2-SA)*

> *I realized that the problems in Philippine construction also happen in construction companies in Singapore. Before, I used to ask myself why there are problems…now, when I got there, I realized that those problems were normal in the construction industry. I thought it was only in the Philippines, but it also happened to me in Singapore. (IN3-SG)*

Post-Overseas Assignment: Personal Growth

As expatriates work overseas, they are thrust into unfamiliar situations and environment, and given greater responsibility. Likewise, they experience different interpersonal and work interactions from that of their home country, which would prompt them to adjust by developing a more mature attitude during their overseas assignment (LawTeacherUK, 2013).

According to the respondents, they saw a change in their viewpoints and attitudes after returning from their overseas assignment. Most of them explained that this change was prompted by the broadening of their horizons as they were able to see from the outside looking in. In addition, they were able to gain self-confidence because of what they accomplished during their overseas assignment, not only as professionals in the fields they are in, but also as individuals who were able to adapt to a foreign culture.

> *At the time, my attitude was like, "It's your loss, not mine," if I want to move from one company to the other…now, I'm not like that anymore. I became more mature. Better work ethics, reporting early for work, unlike before when I used to be so late. (IN7-UAE)*

Post-Overseas Assignment: Increase in Credibility

Because of an expatriate's overseas assignment, they are often deemed more experienced than their colleagues who have remained in the home country, whether from a similar organization or not (Nikolaeva, 2010). This affects their credibility in a positive way, and according to the respondents, they noticed a change in how their workmates interact with them after they have returned from their assignment. As the respondent from Japan expressed:

> *People believe me more than the people who didn't have any experience overseas. Like if there were situations that need to be resolved, they're quarrelling over what they want to do, on what is the right thing to do,*

they will wait for me and ask for my opinion. Usually, what I say goes.
They believe me because of my experience. (IN1-JPN)

Conclusion

Given the data discussion presented, the following objectives of the study were met:

To determine the strategies employed by the participants in preparation for their overseas travel. Based on the answer of the respondents, the two themes that emerged regarding their preparation prior to being assigned overseas are: **managing expectations**, or understanding and anticipating what they will be facing during their overseas assignment, be it *work-related* or *culture-related*; and **undergoing cross-cultural training**, or engaging in *formal* and *informal* means of gathering information about the culture of the host country where they are about to travel to.

To determine the importance of cultural training in relation to cultural adjustment overseas as viewed by the participants. According to the answers of the expatriate participants, cross-cultural training prior to working overseas is important because of two reasons: **conflict avoidance**, or knowing the norms, rules, and values of a culture to avoid offending host country locals and causing interpersonal conflict, which would result in lowered credibility and losing face; and **cultural sensitivity and awareness**, or learning information relevant to the expatriate's interactions with local individuals to expedite the cross-cultural adjustment process after they have arrived at the host country.

To determine the challenges, problems, and difficulties faced by participants during their overseas assignment. Based on the answers given by the respondents regarding the challenges, difficulties, and problems they faced during their overseas assignment, they had problems dealing with general, interaction, and work adjustments (Black, et al., 1991). Specifically, they pointed out four answers, which are categorized as four themes: **language/communication** barriers, or the difficulty of interaction caused by differences in language; **cultural differences**, which are the differences in rules, norms, and values held by the people

of the host country, and this is categorized into five factors: *national culture, local environment, cost of living, food,* and *time*; **work-related cultural differences**, or the mismatch between work-related values held by the individual and the values of their workmates at the host country; and lastly, **homesickness**, or the state of missing family, friends, and norms in the expatriate's home country.

To determine the strategies employed by participants to enhance cultural adjustment during their overseas assignment. According to the respondents, they were able to expedite their cross-cultural adjustment process by using five strategies: **getting social support**, or adjusting by befriending host country locals to help them with cultural difficulties, and befriending home country nationals as a form of support group during the immersion; **learning the language**, or learning key words and phrases of the host country's language to aid in their interactions during the overseas assignment; **internet-based learning**, which is using the internet to search relevant information related to the national cultures of the countries they were assigned to without the added conflicts of intercultural communication; using their **fluency in English**, which has significantly helped with their interactions on a professional level, being able to communicate with employees on the same hierarchical tier as the respondents are in; and lastly, **accepting the host country's culture**, or recognizing the differences in culture, determining the values and norms held by the host country, and accepting the culture by acknowledging the differences and following the rules and norms.

To determine the changes they experienced by participants after returning from their overseas assignment. After returning to the Philippines from their overseas assignment, the respondents expressed significant changes in their personal outlook, as well as their interaction with others. As such, four themes emerged: **appreciation of the Philippines and Filipinos**, which the respondents explained to be something they realized after being exposed to other culture and other nationalities; **appreciation of their job/profession**, which is something they realized after being exposed to the work conditions and technologies of the countries they were assigned to; **personal growth**, or noticing the change in attitude, opinions, and points of view after being thrust in an

unfamiliar environment and still being able to effectively manage the jobs expected of them; and finally, an increase in **credibility**, which is something that came from how their peers in the Philippines perceive them as, especially after they were able to expose themselves to different learning, attitudes, and experiences during their overseas trip.

Overall, based on the data presented and discussed, two general themes emerged from this study: 1) *the importance of language in interaction*, and 2) *the importance of understanding cross-cultural differences through cross-cultural training and other modes of learning*.

Language stood out as one of the most important factors during the overseas assignment of the participants, in that there were various difficulties in their interaction caused by language barriers, but they were able to address these difficulties by learning important words and phrases, as well as communicating using English. Likewise, the literature review and data findings highlight that proper cross-cultural training, be it done prior to leaving the home country or during the overseas assignment, is an indicator of how well adjusted an individual can be in a cross-cultural setting, as uncertainty is minimized through learning more about the host culture an expatriate is in.

Finally, it is hoped that the findings and information found in this study will be vital to Filipino expatriates working overseas, in that they could manage their expectations effectively, and be able to prepare accordingly to maximize their assignment without the added complications of uncertainty and miscommunication. Future studies may opt for a more in-depth view of how culture affects the lives of expatriates on a daily basis, or take reference among expatriates who worked in a similar field or country for a more comparative and concrete analysis.

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