

Women Expatriates: A View of their Own

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Imagine Joan and John. Both are regional sales directors for their multi-national corporations. Both have done well in their jobs and both are on the fast track in their companies. Both are married and have young children. And both are, at the moment, sitting at their computers on their company intranet, about to add their names to the pool of candidates interested in an international assignment.

Joan and John's paths may sound similar, but from the moment they click their 'Submit' buttons, their international experiences are likely to be different. That is, they'll be different to the extent that Joan is a "typical" woman and John a "typical" man. Women and men tend to have different international experiences, for three reasons: (1) their colleagues and customers – both at home and in the new country – treat them differently, (2) they play different roles within their families in ways that will affect their job performance, and (3) they have different personal skills to be tapped in the new country.

Different Treatment

Male and female expatriates tend to be treated differently, but not in the ways you might expect. Many bosses make the assumption that women won't want to take an overseas assignment, and that even if they are sent, they will not be able to work effectively because of gender discrimination in the host country. One female manager who participated in Catalyst's study of women in global business said:

"I found out recently that my name came up for a country manager position in Indonesia. When the group asked my boss what he thought of the idea he said, 'She wouldn't want to go that far away, would she?' My boss couldn't see me in that role, so I never got the chance." It's no wonder then that only 16% of the

international expatriate population are women.

Yet researchers have found that neither assumption is well founded. Women are interested in global assignments, over 90% of the women in the Catalyst study said they'd accept one. To overcome this assumption of disinterest, women said they had to work harder to get those assignments by taking the initiative in asking to be considered; men, in contrast, tended to be invited by their bosses to go.

In addition, women feel they can overcome or avoid gender discrimination. Most of the Catalyst participants reported little difficulty in working effectively in their host countries. These findings were corroborated by interculturalist Saskia Meckman who asked female expatriates, most of whom were living and working in Europe, about their roles as women and the support they received from their companies. Most respondents said that host nationals attitudes toward them were generally positive, and that their male host national colleagues were not reluctant to accept them as expatriates.

It seems, then, that "gender" is not the most important factor after all. When a woman like Joan enters a new country, she is first seen by her colleagues (and/or from headquarters) as "foreign." She is often presented as an "expert", may be highly respected as "the new boss", and even considered perhaps, "unusual" compared to the host national's view on women. Frequently, these labels appease the minds of host nationals and collectively seem to trump her being "female".

Lest too rosy a picture be painted, it is important to acknowledge that gender discrimination can and does occur on international assignments, just as it does in domestic ones. Some of Meckman's participants found themselves in situations where they were not always easily

accepted. The less culturally aware the host group, the more resistance women encountered. Surely, such discrimination is more powerful in some countries than others, especially in countries whose work values about work are very different. Just as in domestic organisations, it is important for companies to take effective steps to manage and minimise the effects of gender-based prejudice. (See "Tips for HR Managers").

Different Family Roles

Women's experiences in global companies are also significantly affected by their roles in their families, but again, not in the ways you might expect. While dual career concerns are assumed to be more common for female managers (and their husbands) than male ones (and their wives), in fact, great strides have been made in providing work and professional support for spouses and in finding creative solutions to these challenges. In today's world, there is no excuse for assuming that a woman manager would refuse an assignment because of her husband's career. Companies must let this be the couple's choice.

On the other hand, there are hidden ways in which a woman's role within her family can challenge an international assignment. Whether living at home or a new country, women tend to take greater responsibility for the care of their elderly parents and their children, regardless of whether they work outside the home or not. And they tend to be the "relationship tenders" – the ones who notice and worry about how people in the family are getting along, how each family member is feeling; who is excited about the new move and who is angry, and who just wants to pack up and go back home. Partner satisfaction and overall family concerns have consistently been documented as one of the key triggers of

assignment failure; it's likely that this is especially true for women expatriates.

Being present during parents' anniversaries, birthdays, and medical emergencies, and being available to help teenage children enter and strive in university, for example, are all harder or impossible across great distances. Even among the members that make the move together, new relationship questions arise. Who will be home after school? Who will take care of the baby? With no sister or grandmother nearby, and no familiarity with community resources, the expatriate in charge of making these choices will be extra stressed. Companies are well advised to provide concrete and creative assistance to employees, male or female, to make these adjustments as smooth as possible. Flexible schedules, financial support for school tuition and fees, as well as cross-cultural training and mentorship programmes will increase the family's positive outlook on life overseas, thus rendering the employee more effective at work. Happily, some women report family tasks to be easier overseas because they have better access to affordable child and household care assistance than they have at home.

Different Personal Skills

It is, of course, a matter of unending debate whether women and men are "truly" different from each other, deeply, inevitably, biologically. But whether sex differences are a function of nature or nurture, they surely exist and can be marshalled to good advantage by corporations.

Sociologists have established that people who have long experience in one-down, low-power relationships (for example, company sub-ordinates, racial minorities, children and women) tend to hone their skills at reading non-verbal cues and at developing and maintaining harmonious group relations. Especially when entering a new culture and working in a new language, employees who have previously successfully adapted to an environment where they were not the majority bring a wealth of valuable experience and practical tools to the organisation.

In particular, psychologists describe women as tending to live "in relation" that is, to value their social networks and personal relationships, and to consider their relation to others as an important component of their identity. Joan, for example, sees herself, importantly, not just as a "sales rep for XYZ Corporation" but also as Lee's mother, Maria's sister, Fei's wife and Anne's friend. When

women enter corporations, they bring this interpersonal style with them, building important bridges and networks as they go. Joan also sees herself as Frank's boss, Luis' assistant, Henrich's customer, Jack's vendor and Jennifer's colleague. Because of this tendency to look for connection, women benefit particularly from having a formal or informal mentor in the company, a senior employee whose job is to watch out for them, advise them about career moves, and help them take advantage of opportunity and avoid mistakes.

In the global business world, the kinds of hubs, or networks, that women build are often more functional than traditional hierarchies. Women who can help build and support these hubs not only are better adjusted themselves, but they also help build the networks in the office and become an invaluable asset to a company. They are better prepared as role models and therefore mentors for those following in their footsteps.

Research from The Interchange Institute shows that expatriate women who are embedded in strong and rich local social networks have better adjustment to life in a new country, making it much more likely that they will be pro-

ductive and supportive of their families. The friends in these networks provide practical support, but more important, they also provide emotional nurturance, affirmation of worth, advice, and camaraderie. It is on the basis of this foundation that expatriates most effectively go on to fulfil their goals.

In short, the company that invites the participation of women into its global workforce and then adequately supports them in their work and life is the company that doubles its potential for growth and productivity. Women also need to be equally proactive in making sure their needs are met. The main areas of support that are needed include (a) paving the way by introducing the women to the host country, highlighting their expertise and skills, (b) preparing both the women and the host nationals with whom they will work, through gender and culture-sensitive training and mentorship programmes, (c) providing the entire family the variety of support needed, and (d) encouraging women to use their networking and social skills to build connections and cultural bridges. Taking all these factors into account, these small investments will inevitably yield high returns.

Tips for HR Managers

- Do not assume women (or their husbands) are not interested in international assignments
- Select the very best person regardless of gender
- Prepare women expatriates for their new experience beforehand by providing them and their entire family with a cross-cultural training programme. Ensure that the training the women receive is designed and conducted with women in mind
- Offer training about gender issues to host nationals as well as women expatriates
- Support the entire family, including the spouse/partner as well as the children and teens, during the entire assignment
- Introduce women expatriates as your most qualified "expert" and "valuable resource" for the job
- Encourage company support to come from regional directors as well as from managers at your headquarters
- Offer in-country support networks, mentor programmes, and company policies supporting women on overseas assignments
- Facilitate support among women expatriates and their extended and nuclear families
- Listen to women expatriates' experiences and help them learn from one another

To participate in this ongoing survey on women expatriates, please visit www.interchangeinstitute.org. To contact Anne Copeland call (617) 566 2227 or copeland@interchangeinstitute.org