

ABSTRACT

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**WORK SITUATION OF
PUBLIC SECTOR EXPATRIATES**

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WORK SITUATION OF PUBLIC SECTOR EXPATRIATES

ABSTRACT

The overwhelming majority of research on expatriate managers emanates from studies of private sector business expatriates. Contributing to this emphasis has been the fast growth and increased numbers of multinational companies and their enhanced needs to manage their world-wide expatriate staff effectively. However, organizations in the public sector have a long tradition of sending personnel overseas for widely differing purposes, including diplomatic and military service as well as inter-governmental exchange programs. Countries with a colonial past (and present), have long historic traditions of dispatching personnel to foreign lands for administrative and military purposes (*cf.* Stening, 1994). In recent years, there is reason to believe that given the current geopolitical situation and frequent regional/local conflicts, public sector (PS) expatriates are becoming more and more common. Although the literature on private sector expatriates has increased rapidly recently (*cf.* Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2005; Hechanova, Beehr & Christiansen, 2003), little is known about PS expatriates and their situation since research on them is scarce (Anderson, 2001; Harris & Holden, 2001). It is not unlikely that the situation may be different for PS expatriates than for private sector expatriates and more research is needed to uncover such potential differences.

Purpose

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the specific situation of PS expatriates and their adjustment to their foreign assignments. More specifically, this investigation will study the relationship between job factors and how the expatriates adjust to their work. This is an important study for several reasons. Firstly, the influence of the public sector ethos on job factors and hence work outcomes of PS expatriates is an obvious and important issue to investigate. Centralization, tight financial controls and political decisions by governments may have a major influence on public sector organizations and hence their expatriates (Harris & Holden, 2001). Secondly, even for private sector expatriates, investigations on work adjustment and its correlates are less than abundant. This is remarkable since the main reason for a company to assign business expatriates abroad is to perform certain work tasks. In the case of PS expatriates, studies on work adjustment are virtually non-existent. Thirdly, against the increasing trend of globalization, the occurrence of PS expatriates most probably is also rising, although no studies are known to have assessed such a development. It is therefore relevant and important to investigate this group of international assignees and try to understand their situation, especially at work.

Methodology

The target population of PS expatriates consisted of United States Department of Defense (DoD) administrators assigned to U.S. embassies worldwide. The choice of target population can be seen as a characteristic representative of PS expatriates. DoD administrators typically has high role clarity (his/her duties are clearly defined by Department of Defense regulations), moderate role discretion (the administrator has to conform administrative, fiscal and logistic actions to Department of Defense, Department of State, and federal regulations) and low to moderate role conflict (the senior officer on station may occasionally tell them to do something in contradiction to established procedures).

DoD administrators are mainly selected based on past performance, the ability to handle sensitive information appropriately, and for the Air Force and Navy, the ability to fit into the embassy community and make themselves good representatives of the United States government. Only the Army has a career senior administrator profession using commissioned Warrant Officers to fill these positions. Other services use a combination of officers (Navy) and very senior non-commissioned officers (Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps) to fill senior administrator posts (Army Regulation 611-60).

All potential administrators attend a ten week attaché staff support course at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington DC. The course serves as an introduction to supporting military attaches on station and prepares the candidates for the administrative, fiscal and logistical tasks that lie ahead. After the initial training, the administrator receives language or country specific training required to perform successfully. Country specific training normally consists of consultations and briefings with military analysts to help the administrator understand the current military to military engagement in the country to which the administrator will be assigned. The amount of language training given to the administrator is determined by the military service based upon input from the country to which the administrator will be assigned (Joint Military Attaché School; Support Staff Curriculum, 2004).

Consequently, the target group of DoD administrators make up a relevant group representing typical members working for public sector organizations. Furthermore, the DoD administrators all perform the same work tasks but are at various geographical locations worldwide and at various stages in their careers, thus providing for the necessary variation of the investigated issues.

The survey instrument was sent out to the entire target population via the intranet inviting all DoD administrators to participate. Of the 314 surveys sent out, respondents returned 174 usable surveys for a return rate of 55 percent. The completed questionnaires were returned either by fax or electronically.

Work adjustment was assessed by a single item from the scale developed by Black (1988): “How adjusted are you to your job and responsibilities?”. The response categories ranged from (1) “not adjusted at all” to (7) “completely adjusted”.

Role discretion and *job satisfaction* were measured by the Career Development Survey (Nicholson, 1987). Role discretion was measured with a four point Likert-type scale from (1) much less than my previous job to (4) much more than my previous job, sample item: “I am free to act independently”.

Principal Component Analysis produced a single factor accounting for 74 percent of the variance ($\alpha=.88$). Job satisfaction was assessed by a five point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree, sample item: "I am satisfied with my job". Again, Principal Component Analysis confirmed its uni-dimensionality as a single factor emerged accounting for 51 percent of the variance ($\alpha=.69$). .

Role clarity and *role conflict* were assessed by the scales of Rizzo, House and Lirtzman (1970) and *role overload* by the instrument of Kahn (1964). Responses for all three scales were measured using a Likert-type scale from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. Principal Component Analyses of the first two scales indicated that they were both uni-dimensional. The items in the role clarity scale accounted for 69 percent of the variance ($\alpha=.85$), sample item: "I have clear instruction on how to do my job", while the role conflict scale accounted for 67 percent of the variance ($\alpha = .75$), sample item: "I receive contradictory orders from headquarters leadership and local leadership".

One item was omitted from the role overload scale to adapt to the work situation of DoD administrators but the remaining two items reflect both qualitative and quantitative overload (Maslach & Jackson, 1984; Kahn, 1978; Pines & Maslach, 1978). Again Principal Component Analysis of this scale produced a single factor accounting for 80 percent of the variance ($\alpha = .76$), sample item: "There is insufficient time to do my work".

Work effectiveness was assessed by a self-developed, single item Likert-type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree: "I am effective at my job".

Time on current location was applied as a control variable since work adjustment, as well as any other form of adjustment, can be regarded as a process over time following a learning curve (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Church, 1982; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). This variable was assessed by a direct question to the respondents: "How long have you served at your current location?".

Results

The variable *time in current location* had a positive association with two of the three work outcomes, primarily with *work adjustment* and to a lesser extent with *work effectiveness*. The positive relationship with *work adjustment* is consistent with previous research findings on private sector expatriates (cf. Selmer, 2002; Takeuchi, *et.al.*, 2005). It is also worth noting that despite a better adjustment to work and increased related effectiveness over time in the same location, the DoD administrators do not experience higher *job satisfaction*.

Role clarity is the job factor that may affect DoD administrators the most as it is positively associated with all of the investigated outcome variables; *work adjustment*, *work effectiveness* and *job satisfaction*. The positive association between *role clarity* and the DoD administrators' adjustment to work is comparable with research results from private sector expatriates integrated in a recent meta-analytic investigation covering 66 studies and almost 8,500 expatriates (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, *et.al.*, 2005). In order for DoD administrators to perform successfully, they must clearly understand what the Defense Attaché and headquarters expect from them. Without this initial understanding, the administrator may have adjustment problems.

Conversely, *role conflict* and *role overload* both had a negative relationship with *work adjustment* of the DoD administrators. These results coincide with previous research conducted on private sector expatriates (cf. Bhaskar-Shrinivas, *et.al.*, 2005; Hechanova, Beehr & Christiansen, 2003; Morley, 1997; Shaffer, Harrison & Gilley, 1999). Administrators often feel both confused and overwhelmed by the enormity of the tasks required of them and have to turn to other administrators for help.

The negative association between *role conflict* and *job satisfaction* as well as between *role overload* and *job satisfaction* seems logical. While DoD administrators feel that they can still be effective at their work, stress and tension to choose between headquarters and local leadership guidance may affect their satisfaction. Conflicts of guidance between headquarters and the Defense Attaché may cause conflicts in the administrator's mind, since the administrator knows that the Defense Attaché's opinion carries the most weight on his/her evaluation. For example, it is necessary for headquarters to support DoD administrators who make correct ethical choices (supporting headquarters policy) by protecting their career. DoD administrators should feel that if they report impropriety, the headquarters will remove the Defense Attaché's evaluation authority (essentially ensuring "whistleblower protection."). *Role overload* may induce a feeling of helplessness creating stress.

As predicted, *role discretion* has a positive relationship with DoD administrators' *job satisfaction* indicating that they regard autonomy allowing them to adapt their work role and setting to themselves positively. Surprisingly, there is no association between *role discretion* and the other two work outcomes. For private sector expatriates, a positive relationship has repeatedly been found between *role discretion* and *work adjustment* (cf. Bhaskar-Shrinivas, *et.al.*, 2005; Hechanova, Beehr & Christiansen, 2003; Shaffer, Harrison & Gilley, 1999).

Main Conclusions

This is the first known rigorous survey studying the work situation of PS expatriates. As such, it contributes to the literature representing an initial attempt to highlight the work situation of this under-researched group of expatriates. Based on the finding of this study of job factors and work outcomes of DoD administrators, one may conclude that PS expatriates could have a similar work situation as private sector expatriates. Despite different working conditions for PS expatriates, presumably conditioned by the public sector ethos affected by centralization, tight financial controls and political decisions by governments (Harris & Holden, 2001), several similarities but few discrepancies were detected. While most work outcomes of both private and public sector expatriates may be sensitive to most of the studied job factors, only the potency of expatriates' discretionary powers appeared to differ between the two expatriate groups. This may require further investigation considering the potential limitation of this study, but it is interesting to note that while PS expatriates may be more satisfied with their jobs, more discretionary powers may not increase adjustment to their work.