

Considering an employee for an overseas assignment? Study says personality has a big impact on how well they adjust

April 3 2018

More globalization means more multinational corporations are increasingly sending their employees overseas, swelling the ranks of expatriates in foreign locales where they are strangers to the language, the culture and ways of doing business.

A new study from Florida Atlantic University shows that [expatriates'](#) personality characteristics have a lot to do with how well they adjust and whether they succeed and provide a return on a company's considerable investment in an individual.

"Oftentimes, expatriates have difficulty adjusting to this new environment. They can suffer poor well-being, experience conflict between their work life and family life, perform poorly and turnover," said Michael Harari, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Management Programs in FAU's College of Business, co-author of the study. "All expatriates are different. Maybe some are more adept to adjusting effectively where others aren't. We wanted to understand what characteristics of expatriates make them more or less likely to adjust effectively."

The study is published in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*.

Harari and his fellow researchers from Florida International University

and Citi carried out a meta-analysis of personality-expatriate adjustment correlations, organized around the framework of the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality, which includes broad factors for [emotional stability](#), openness, extraversion, conscientiousness and agreeableness.

When it comes to expatriate adjustment, three of those personality traits seem to play a more important role, according to Harari. Expatriates who tended to do well with foreign assignments tended to be extraverts who were both emotionally stable and open to new experiences, the research found. Harari believes that extraverts are much better at forming larger and denser social networks, which helps them with the emotional and informational support that is key to succeeding on an expatriate assignment.

"Extraverts are more adept at building these support networks, and we believe that's why extraversion was so important," he added.

Emotional stability also plays a key role. Relocating to a different country and being embedded in a new culture where everything is different can be very stressful.

"Having strong emotional reactions to these types of stimuli acts as a barrier to effective adjustment," Harari said. "People who are very emotionally stable, they're not as affected by the culture shock and the various stressors that are faced on assignment; they are much more even-tempered and this helps them to adjust better in the face of these various stressors."

When you're interacting with someone in a foreign culture, you don't always understand how to interpret different behaviors. People who exhibit openness to experience tend to enjoy the novelty of living in a new culture, Harari explained, and they're much more tolerant of ambiguity.

Sending someone overseas is a considerable investment, Harari noted. Corporations should choose individuals who not only can perform their job but also have the ability to do it in the context of a foreign environment. According to Harari, individuals who may be interested in foreign assignments should consider evaluating their own personalities to determine how well they are likely to adjust to the various challenges faced. Further, corporations may want to use personality assessments as part of their career development and expatriate selection systems to cut down on employee turnover.

"The stakes are very high, and that's why we think it was so important to go beyond the existing research and look at the dispositions of people on foreign assignment," Harari said. "Expatriates have their own characteristics that they bring with them, and these characteristics impact how they react to the various stressors faced on assignment and the behaviors they engage in overseas that have implications for adjustments."

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

Citation: Considering an employee for an overseas assignment? Study says personality has a big impact on how well they adjust (2018, April 3) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-04-employee-overseas-assignment-personality-big.html>

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