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OPEN-MINDEDNESS AND FLEXIBILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF A SUCCESSFUL INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENT

The present article deals with the success of international assignments and focuses on the relevance of the intercultural personality dimensions flexibility and open-mindedness. The results of the quantitative study suggest that open-mindedness is important for success. The more open-minded an expatriate is, the more successful he is abroad. Flexibility, on the other hand, does not predict international success. Neither open-mindedness nor flexibility are subject to change during the potentially critical life event of an international assignment.

Key words: International assignments, success, personality.

Introduction and theoretical background

The phenomenon of globalization is, without doubt, one of the most important characteristics of our society in the 21st century. Today's work and private life are characterized by transnational cultural and economic markets as well as interaction between culturally diverse people on multiple levels [6, 9].

International assignments represent a context in which the confrontation with cultural differences is particularly intense. The requirements bound to an international assignment are very diverse and demand substantial life changes. The expatriates are confronted with the challenge to integrate into a new and complex cultural system and are, at the same time, asked to perform highly in a mostly very responsible position abroad [4]. It is not an exception that expatriates are overextended with these expectations and that, as a consequence, the success of the international assignment is in danger. Given, that international assignments are expensive for a company and, therefore, the pressure to succeed is generally very high, failure is looked upon negatively within the organization and often has drastic negative consequences for the career of the respective employee.

Consequently, a structured and thorough international personnel assessment, as well as adequate preparation and supervision of the international assignment, which is aligned with the intercultural challenges of living and working abroad, are very important. As a prerequisite, it has to be defined which characteristics are relevant for international personnel selection. In addition, it is essential to examine if these significant characteristics can be trained and if they may change due to the intense experiences of an international assignment.

Hypotheses

The objective of the present study is to find relations between selected predictors and success criteria of international assignments within the group of German expatriates. The personality traits open-mindedness and flexibility, two characteristics that are considered important facets of intercultural competence, are examined as potential predictors of international success [3, 7]. International success, on the other hand, is measured via self evaluation and is based on multiple success criteria that have proven relevant in research in the past 20 years: psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of the expatriate in the foreign country, his work satisfaction and his personal performance evaluation.

Hypothesis 1:

The personality traits open-mindedness and flexibility have a positive impact on the success criteria of an international assignment.

In addition, it is examined if the two personality traits, open-mindedness and flexibility, are subject to change during the time spent abroad. While personality traits are rather stable and don't normally change in a short period of time, the experience of an international assignment may represent a critical life event which catalyzes and supports personality development due to diverse intercultural contact situations. Zimmermann and Neyer (2013) could prove that, during a stay abroad, a change in personality dimensions is generally possible. In their empirical study with a sample of 1134 international students, they found a change in the personality dimensions openness, agreeableness and neuroticism.

Hypothesis 2:

The values of the dimensions open-mindedness and flexibility vary depending on the time an expatriate has already spent abroad at the time of the study. Both characteristics are higher with people that have been abroad longer.

Method and sample

The two hypotheses were examined using a quantitative study design. The questionnaire mainly consists of reliable and valid instruments that have been successfully used in comparable contexts of research.

Socio-cultural adaptation is measured with the scale Expatriate Adjustment by Black and Stephens (1989). It consists of the three dimensions General Adjustment (adjustment to living conditions, 7 items), Interaction Adjustment (adjustment to social interaction with locals, 4 items) and Work Adjustment (adjustment to work conditions, 3 items). To measure psychological adjustment (life satisfaction) the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) by Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin (1985) is used. It consists of five items. Work Satisfaction is measured with a shortened version of the instrument Skala zur Messung allgemeiner Arbeitszufriedenheit (SAZ) by Fischer and Lück (1972). Respondents rate their satisfaction with their work and work conditions abroad on eight items.

To capture the performance of the expatriates abroad, seven items were formulated on the basis of an instrument by Caligiuri (1997). The seven

items were adapted to suit the sample of the present study. The internal consistency and factorial validity of the modified scale were confirmed. The personality of respondents is measured with the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) by van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2000). The two included dimensions, flexibility and open-mindedness, both consist of eighteen Items. In addition, sociodemographic data was collected. It includes information about the work conditions abroad as well as other specifics of the international assignment. In this context, the respondents were also asked to mention the duration of their international assignment at the time of the survey.

The sample consists of 328 German expatriates in different cultural regions. All participants had been abroad for at least three months at the time of the survey and their assignment was planned to last at least one year in total. With 92.4 % (n = 303), the largest portion of the respondents were male. The age distribution, on the other hand, was very balanced. Of the expatriates, 41.5 % (n = 136) were younger than 40 years, 42.7 % were within the age range of 40 and 50 years (n = 140) and 15.9 % (n = 52) were older than 50 years.

Results and discussion

In the following, the main results of the study are presented based on the formulated hypotheses. First, the effects of the variables open-mindedness and flexibility on the success criteria are examined.

1. Effects of the characteristics open-mindedness and flexibility on the success criteria (H1)

To test the first hypothesis, regression analyzes were computed. Open-mindedness and flexibility were considered predictors.

Open-mindedness proves to be a very important characteristic of successful expatriates. Open-mindedness manifests itself in an unprejudiced and open attitude towards other groups and differing value systems. Regression analysis shows a significant positive effect on all considered success criteria. The strongest effect concerns the personal performance evaluation of the expatriate ($\beta = .52^{***}$; $p = .000$).

Surprisingly, the flexibility of an expatriate doesn't have impact on any of the success criteria. A person that can easily switch from one strategy to another and adapt his or her behavior to a new cultural environment is not necessarily more successful abroad. Accordingly, the hypothesis (1) can only be partially confirmed.

Furthermore, it was examined, if and to what extent a change in the characteristics of open-mindedness and flexibility occurs due to critical intercultural experiences abroad.

2. Differences in the characteristics of open-mindedness and flexibility, depending on the duration of the assignment abroad (H2)

To test the second hypothesis, the sample is divided into expatriates with a previous duration of the assignment of less (N = 183) and more (N = 145) than two years.

Table 1

Effects of open-mindedness and flexibility on the success criteria

	Work Adjustment	General Adjustment	Interaction Adjustment	Life Satisfaction	Work Satisfaction	Performance Evaluation
Intercultural Personality	R2 = .11 R2 corr. = .10 F = 19.43 f2 = .11	R2 = .06 R2 corr. = .06 F = 11.17 f2 = .06	R2 = .14 R2 corr. = .13 F = 25.99 f2 = .15	R2 = .05 R2 corr. = .05 F = 8.99 f2 = .05	R2 = .08 R2 corr. = .08 F = 14.63 f2 = .08	R2 = .24 R2 corr. = .24 F = 51.44 f2 = .31
Open-mindedness	0,34***	0,24***	0,39***	0,25***	0,31***	0,52***
Flexibility	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

The results of a t-test with independent samples show that there are no differences in the value of the characteristics open-mindedness and flexibility, depending on the previous duration of the assignment. Expatriates that have already completed most of their international assignment do not tend to be more open and flexible than expatriates who are in the first half of their time abroad.

In consequence, the hypothesis (2) cannot be confirmed.

Table 2

Comparison of means for open-mindedness and flexibility in people with having spent more and less than two years abroad

		M	SD	t	df	Sig. (two-tailed)
Open-mindedness	Stay abroad < 2 years	5.23	0.65	-1.41	326	n.s.
	Stay abroad >= 2 years	5.32	0.55			
Flexibility	Stay abroad < 2 years	4,75	0.56	1.36	326	n.s.
	Stay abroad >= 2 years	4.67	0.51			

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, it can be stated that the personality traits open-mindedness and flexibility are only partly relevant for a successful international assignment.

The personality trait of open-mindedness is particularly important for international success and should, therefore, be considered as a selection criteria for international assignments in companies. Surprisingly, flexibility has no impact on the value of the success criteria. Considering that the organizational background during international assignments facilitates and minimizes administrative requirements abroad and the professional and private social network often consist of other expatriates, it can be assumed that flexibility is less important than in other intercultural settings. That the circumstances of an international assignment compensate for all the positive effects that flexibility can have on international experiences is rather unlikely though. It is possible that the unexpected results are founded in methodological prob-

lems. The reliability coefficient of the flexibility scale is $\alpha = .72$, which is, in comparison with the other scales, rather low. In addition, there is partially low discriminatory power between the items of the scale. A similar observation was made by Van Oudenhoven, Mol and Van at the Zee (2003). Their study on the relations between a multicultural personality and various performance measures also showed a low reliability and small effect sizes for the flexibility scale in the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire.

Contrary to hypothesis 2, it was found that expatriates with a longer previous duration of stay abroad are not more open and flexible than their counterparts with a shorter previous length of stay. Even though spending time abroad can potentially be a critical life event, the results suggest that a change in stable personality traits due to the intercultural experiences is still very unlikely. As a result, international training and development programs should focus less on changing the characteristics of open-mindedness and flexibility themselves, but should instead work on coping strategies based on the existing personality structure of a person. In this context, personalized formats, like, for example, intercultural coaching, are very promising. They can be helpful before, as well as during and after the international assignment.

The fact that the results of the study by Neyer and Zimmermann (2013) were not supported might be due to a very different study design and the differing context of the two studies. Firstly, it has to be noted that Neyer and Zimmermann (2013) only included students in their study. Students are generally exposed to different conditions and challenges as expatriates. While expatriates experience organizational support and often can rely on expatriate communities as a social network abroad, students are likely to be more on their own and, due to that, face more multicultural experiences on diverse levels. Another difference of the two studies is the examined time frame of the stay abroad. While Neyer and Zimmermann (2013) focused on a short-term period of up to eight months, the present investigation was interested in a longer time frame and included expatriates that have been abroad for more than five years in total. Possibly the biggest difference between the two studies, which also illustrates a main point of criticism in the present study, refers to the study design. In contrast to the study by Neyer and Zimmermann (2013), which is based on a longitudinal design with three subsequent occasions of data collection, the present study is based on a cross-sectional study design. Accordingly, the data doesn't highlight the personality development of a single person, but compares two groups of expatriates based on the criterion of previous duration of the international assignment.

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ВІДКРИТІСТЬ І ГНУЧКІСТЬ В КОНТЕКСТІ УСПІШНОГО МІЖНАРОДНОГО ПРИЗНАЧЕННЯ

Резюме

Дана стаття присвячена успіху міжнародних взаємодій і фокусується на актуальності міжкультурних вимірів особистості: гнучкості та відкритості. Результати кількісних досліджень свідчать про те, що відкритість є важливою для успіху. Результати дослідження показали, що експатріанти з більш високим рівнем відкритості є більш успішним за кордоном. Гнучкість, зі свого боку, не є чинником успішної міжнародної взаємодії.

Ключові слова: міжнародні призначення, успіх, особистість.

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ОТКРЫТОСТЬ И ГИБКОСТЬ В КОНТЕКСТЕ УСПЕШНОГО МЕЖДУНАРОДНОГО НАЗНАЧЕНИЯ

Резюме

Данная статья посвящена успеху международных взаимодействий и фокусируется на актуальности межкультурных измерений личности: гибкости и открытости. Результаты количественных исследований свидетельствуют о том, что открытость является важной для успеха. Результаты исследования показали, что экспатрианты с более высоким уровнем открытости являются более успешным за границей. Гибкость, со своей стороны, не является фактором успешного международного взаимодействия.

Ключевые слова: международные назначения, успех, личность.

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