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International training and management development: theory and reality

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to outline the theoretical perspectives of international training and development and examine how theoretical frameworks have been implemented by practitioners.

Design/methodology/approach - Literature review.

Findings – There appears to be a considerable gap between academic theories and multinational enterprises' (MNEs') practices. MNEs pay little attention to international training and management development. Ineffective international training and management development have a considerably adverse impact on MNEs.

Practical implications – In order to succeed in a globally competitive environment MNEs need to effectively train expatriates and their spouses, host-country nationals (HCNs) and third-country nationals (TCNs), and develop and nurture a truly global management team.

Originality/value – This paper systematically reviews the existing literature and reveals a considerable gap between academic theories and MNEs' practices.

Keywords International business, Human resource management, Multinational companies, Training, Management development

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

As a result of an increase in the number and influence of multinational enterprises (MNEs), since the early 1990s there has been a growing interest in international human resource management (IHRM), reflecting the growing recognition that the effective management of human resources internationally is a major determinant of success in international business (Dowling *et al.*, 1994; Scullion, 1994; Edwards *et al.*, 1996; Scullion and Starkey, 2000). In the international arena, the quality of management seems to be even more critical than in domestic operations (Tung, 1984). However, as Adler and Bartholomew (1992) have suggested, organizational strategy (the what) is becoming more international faster than the implementation (the how) and much faster than the development of international managers (the who). There is still relatively little empirical research, documenting the IHRM strategies and practices of multinationals. The shortage of international managers is a significant constraint on the successful implementation of global strategies (Hamill, 1989; Scullion, 1994, 1995) and many companies underestimate the complex nature of HRM problems involved in international operations (Dowling *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, there is much less research



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into international training and management development of MNEs, and especially, into IHRM of MNEs originating from economies other than Western market ones (Siu and Darby, 1999; Shen and Darby, 2004). This study explores a selection of issues of international training and management development and their implementation in MNEs, e.g. what are effective international training and management development approaches? The methodology of this paper is to employ a literature review and discuss the author's own empirical research conducted in 2001 on Chinese MNEs. It starts with international training and then turns to international management development.

Importance of international training and development

International training and management development are always closely associated in the management literature. Gregerson *et al.* (1998) proposed four strategies for developing global managers: international travel; the formation of diversified teams; international assignments and training. These four strategies relate to expatriation management, particularly integrating international training and management development. Training aims to improve current work skills and behaviour, whereas development aims to increase abilities in relation to some future position or job, usually a managerial one (Dowling *et al.*, 1999, p. 155). A truly global manager needs a set of context-specific abilities, such as industry-specific knowledge, and a core of certain characteristics, such as cultural sensitivity, ability to handle responsibility, ability to develop subordinates and ability to exhibit and demonstrate (Baumgarten, 1992). These characteristics and skills are considered as important international competencies and all can be developed through effective international training and management development.

International training refers to training for international assignments. There are three broad types of international trainings in MNEs. They are:

- (1) *Preparatory training for expatriates*: once a person has been appointed for an international assignment, pre-departure training is normally used to ensure the candidate has adequate skills and knowledge that are necessary for working abroad effectively.
- (2) Post-arrival training for expatriates: after an expatriate has gone abroad, further on-site training is often used to familiarize the expatriate with the local working environment and procedures.
- (3) Training for host-country nationals (HCNs) and third-country nationals (TCNs): Training should be provided to HCNs and TCNs to facilitate understanding of corporate strategy, corporate culture and socialization.

Preparatory training for expatriates has received most attention in the international literature as expatriate failure (i.e. the premature return of an expatriate manager before the period of assignment is completed) is always regarded as due to a lack of adequate training for expatriates and their spouses. The expatriate failure rate is an important indicator for measuring the effectiveness of expatriation management. The costs of expatriate failure are high and involve both direct and indirect elements. In the case of expatriate recalls, the direct costs include salary, training costs and travel and relocation expenses. Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) stated that the average cost per failure to the parent company ranges between US\$55,000 and US\$80,000, depending on

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currency exchange rates and location of assignment. Indirect costs may be considerable and unquantified, such as damaging relations with the host country government and other local organisations and customers, as well as loss of market share, damage to corporate reputation and lost business opportunities. The literature indicates that expatriate failure is a persistent and recurring problem and failure rates remain high. Much research has been conducted among US MNEs and it has revealed "alarmingly high failure rates" (Brewster, 1988). Some expatriate failure rates reported, for example, are shown in Table I (Shen and Edwards, 2004).

The complex and ever-changing global environment requires flexibility. The organization's ability to devise strategic responses, however, may be constrained by a lack of suitably trained, internationally oriented personnel. Tung (1981, 1982) and Mendenhall *et al.* (1987, 1995) identified a negative correlation between the rigor of a company's selection and training processes and its expatriate failure rate. The use of more rigorous training programmes could significantly improve the expatriate's performance in an overseas environment, thus minimizing the incidence of failure. Earley (1987) has argued that cultural training enables individuals to adjust more rapidly to the new culture and be more effective in their new roles. There is an association between met expatriate' expectation and provision of international training. "Highly relevant cross-cultural training created either accurate expectations or expectations of difficulty prior to the assignment" (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2001). Table II indicates some reasons for expatriate failure in US and Japanese MNEs (Tung, 1982; Dowling *et al.*, 1999).

As Table II shows, expatriate failure is seldom a consequence of a lack of technical skills. The inability of both expatriates and their spouses to adapt is a far more important cause of expatriate failure. Studies have also found that between 16 percent and 40 percent of US managers sent on overseas assignments

Expatriate failure rates (%)	Origin of MNEs	
30-85 70 5-15 10-30 40.2 25-40 5-10	US Developing countries European US Swedish US European	

Table I.	
Expatriate failure rates	

Order	US	Japanese
1	The ability of spouse to adjust	Inability to cope with larger overseas responsibility
2	Manager's inability to adjust	Difficulties with new environment
3	Other family problems	Personal or emotional problems
4	Manager's personal or emotional maturity	Lack of technical competence
5	Inability to cope with larger overseas responsibility	The ability of spouse to adjust

Table II.Reasons for expatriate failure (in descending order of importance)

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return prematurely because of poor performance or an inability to adjust to the foreign environment. According to Brewster (1988), the inability of one's spouse to adjust was the only consistent reason given by respondents from European MNEs. Hamill (1989) found that one of the reasons for the low failure rate of UK MNEs was the greater emphasis placed on pre-departure briefing for both expatriates and their families.

International management development deals with identifying, fostering, promoting and using international managers. Its major issues include international management development schemes, approaches to international management development, promotion criteria and factors affecting approaches to international management development. International management development can also be expected to play a central role in MNEs because of its importance in developing a cross-national corporate culture and integrating international operations. According to Bartlett and Ghoshal (2000), global firms can enhance their inter-unit linkages by creating a pool of global managers from anywhere in the world. Management development in MNEs is the "glue" bonding together otherwise loose and separate entities. Pucik (1984) argued that probably the most formidable task facing many multinational firms is the development of a cadre of managers and executives who have an understanding of the global market environment deep enough to enable them to survive and come out ahead.

International training provision

Although many have highlighted the importance of international training, international training is often neglected or poorly handled in MNEs. McEnery and DesHarnais's (1990) survey shows that between 50 and 60 percent of US companies operating abroad at that time did not provide any pre-departure training. Tung (1981) also observed that only 32 percent of the US companies surveyed provided some international training. The 1997-1998 Price Waterhouse survey revealed that only 13 percent of European firms surveyed always provided their expatriates with access to cultural awareness courses, though a further 47 percent provided briefings for culturally "challenging" postings. To aggravate the situation even further, most training is of very short duration, generally lasting only a few days (Baumgarten, 1995). Torbiorn (1982) and Tung (1982) confirmed that European MNEs provide more training than US companies. About half of European corporations provide formal training.

Taking China as an example of a developing country, there is generally low awareness of the importance of training for expatriates in Chinese MNEs. The majority of Chinese MNEs tend to provide very limited or *ad hoc* pre-departure training for expatriates. Most Chinese companies provide only irregular briefings or do not provide training programmes for expatriates at all. Where training is offered, the training duration is usually short, such as two days or one to two weeks, due to the limited training programmes provided. Normally, expatriates are often not given adequate preparation time between notification of the posting and relocation. No formal and compulsory policy about post-arrival training for expatriates is made at the corporate level in any the selected Chinese firm. Headquarters normally leave local managers to decide if there is a need to provide such post-arrival training. Chinese firms are also very weak in providing training for HCNs, spouses and families. The majority of

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Chinese MNEs provide only job briefings for HCN employees instead of proper training.

Reasons for not providing adequate training

The common reasons why Western MNEs neglect preparatory training for international assignments (Tung, 1982; Welch, 1994; Baumgarten, 1995) are:

- training is not thought to be effective;
- · lack of time:
- the temporary nature of most assignments does not warrant budget expenditures for training;
- lack of knowledge of how to carry out training and what courses should be offered (lack of training experts and expertise);
- no need for training because there is a belief that technical skills are the only ones needed to carry out assignments abroad; and
- the right people do not need to be trained.

In the case of Chinese MNEs, the most frequently reported reasons are consistent with the prevailing literature. Training is thought to be unnecessary as technical skills are regarded as the main factors for successful overseas assignments and intercultural competencies are not important. Moreover, technical skills are considered not able to be gained through short training. Lack of expertise is sometimes cited as a reason for not providing proper training. Time and money are normally not an issue. If training was seen to be important, money and time would be arranged so it could be carried out.

Training programmes

Most preparatory training emphasizes the ability to understand and adjust (Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Brewster and Pickard, 1994). The areas for which pre-departure training is required are wide-ranging. Shen and Darby (2004) have pointed out that international training should take into consideration of the host-contextual factors, including political, legal, economic and socio-cultural aspects. Host-contextual factors affect international training programmes and methods. Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) proposed three critical areas in which organisations should prepare their employees: cultural training, language instruction training and orientation training on familiarity with everyday matters. Dowling et al. (1999) suggest that training programmes should also cover areas of ethical concern, such as bribery, human rights, justice and the common good. Many authors also state that the components of training programmes should vary according to country of assignment, type of job, duration, purpose of transfer and the time available (Tung, 1981, 1982; Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985; Brewster, 1988; Baumgarten, 1992; McDonald, 1993; Dowling et al., 1999.) Osman-Gani (2000) suggested that host country subsidiary-partner personnel are the most effective and qualified people to provide the necessary training because they are familiar with the conditions and environment of the host country and hence in the best position to impart the necessary knowledge and skills to the expatriates. In-house or company personnel are the next most effective trainers. University or academic professionals are the least effective training providers.

In reality, according to Lanier (1979), on top of the fact that most of the companies provide only brief environmental summaries and some culture and language preparation, mainly concentrating on the development of technical competence and other job-related skills. The most frequently provided training programmes for expatriates in Chinese MNEs are cultural awareness (briefings on host countries) and compliance with companies' policies. Only a very small number of firms provide international marketing, finance, economics, technical or management and language training programmes. Tung (1982) identified six major types of cross-cultural training used by US, European and Japanese companies, which include: environmental briefings to provide information about geography, climate, housing and schools; cultural orientation to familiarise the individual with cultural institutions and value systems of the host country; cultural assimilators using programmed learning approaches designed to expose members of one culture to some basic concepts, attitudes, role perceptions and customs of another culture; language training; sensitivity training to develop attitudinal flexibility; and field experience, which sends the participant to the country of assignment to undergo some of the emotional stress of living and working with people from a different culture. Brewster (1988) found that the emphasis placed by European multinationals on language training was stronger than that of US multinationals. He also proposed six broad categories of training programmes including shadowing, look-sees, informal briefings, overlap, formal training courses and language training, which are actually similar to the other programmes mentioned above.

Osman-Gani (2000) has argued that the content, mode of delivery and training rigor are important factors in determining the success of training and development programmes for overseas assignments. The common training methods used by Western MNEs include area briefing, indoor lecture, preliminary/orientation visit, probation (or practical assistance training), and interview with repatriates or expatriates (Tung, 1981, 1982; Black and Mendenhall, 1989; McDonald, 1993; Edkins, 1995; Dowling *et al.*, 1999; Osman-Gani, 2000). For example, Osman-Gani (2000) insisted that practical assistance training makes an important contribution to expatriates and their family successfully adapting to their new environment. According to Black and Mendenhall (1989), low-rigour training includes approaches, such as lectures, films, area briefings and books. High-rigour approaches include interactive language training, assessment centres and sophisticated simulations. The duration of low-rigour training was four to 20 hours; for high-rigour training it was between 60 and 180 hours. According to Anderson (1990), some Western MNEs allow adequate time between notification of the posting and relocation.

The major preparatory training method used by Chinese MNEs is in-house training by senior managers or external academics. Other methods, such as reconnaissance visits prior to taking up actual duties abroad, probation, interviews with senior executives to clarify the objectives of the assignment or employing outside consultants, are not used. Extensive discussions with previous and current expatriates knowledgeable about the host countries are hardly used either. Chinese MNEs usually provide the same training programmes for all expatriates irrespective of assignments/or levels in spite of the need for different emphases. A small number of Chinese MNEs have established their own "universities" for employee training and overseas training centres. Chinese MNEs generally do not systematically analyse

employee-training needs or consult line managers or expatriate themselves, or analyse expatriates' performance in making decisions on training.

Moreover, many authors emphasize the importance of involving spouse and family in pre-departure training because the inability of the manager's partner to adapt to a different physical or cultural environment is a major reason why international assignments end in failure (Tung, 1981; Black and Gregersen, 1991; Baumgarten, 1995; Osman-Gani, 2000). However, according to Mendenhall *et al.* (1987), in 80 percent of the cases where training is provided, partners are not included in the training programmes. Welch (1994) stated that MNEs placed less priority on providing pre-departure training for the spouses and families. A study on international training in Chinese MNEs by Shen and Darby (2004) lends support to Mendenhall *et al.* and Welch.

International management development

Many commentators suggest that MNEs develop human development-related HRM strategies and innovative development approaches to attract, retain and develop top international executive talents (Moynihan, 1993; Kopp, 1994; Scullion, 1994; Baumgarten, 1995; Youndt *et al.* 1996; Dowling *et al.*, 1999). Youndt *et al.* (1996) have pointed out that forward-thinking firms tend to use human development-related HRM strategies and have better outcomes as a result. The negative effect of poor management development is obvious. According to Dowling *et al.* (1999) turnover among repatriates may be a consequence of a perceived lack of career advancement on the basis of international experience. As Scullion (1996) has suggested, it may be difficult to recruit local managers with much talent if they feel they will not have the opportunity to undertake major roles in the company.

Kopp (1994) suggested that MNEs should build a centralised personnel roster tracking managerial talents throughout the world. Dowling *et al.* (1999) argued that MNEs should commit to individual development security by forming a well-developed systematic repatriation system, and career and succession planning. Linking international experience to management development is also important, as Forster (2000) argued: "International experience has traditionally been an essential stepping-stone to senior management in many Western multinational companies". Many authors agree with the view that an effective international management scheme should include an analysis of the current international management pool, the future need for international managers, and a mechanism for developing and fostering a truly international management team (international oriented and diversified). MNEs should include HCNs and TCNs in international management development schemes, i.e. developing HCN managers through developmental transfers back to headquarters (Pucik, 1984; Doz and Prahalad, 1986; Dowling *et al.*, 1994; Kopp, 1994; Paauwe and Dewe, 1995; Baumgarten, 1995; Scullion and Starkey, 2000.)

Inpatriation has been recently cited as a solution to the lack of socialization between HCNs and PCNs, high expatriate failure and high international assignment refusal (Harvey *et al.*, 2001). The transfer of HCNs and TCNs to headquarters exposes local managers to headquarters' corporate culture and facilitates the development of a corporate perspective rather than simply reflecting local interests (Scullion, 1994). Edstrom and Galbraith (1977) argued that transferring HCN managers to corporate headquarters can be very effective in helping to develop global management teams and is a necessary part of successfully operating a truly global firm. Including HCNs and

TCNs in management development will improve employees' performance from a global perspective. According to Baumgarten (1995), the reason is simple because the ultimate success of an expatriate assignment depends not only on the expatriate himself or herself but also upon the local people with whom he/she has to work.

However, in reality, many MNEs are weak in international management development and lack commitment to individual career planning and management development at the corporate level. There is little evidence that MNEs tend to identify managers of high potential at an early stage in their career and give them the chance to gain international experience at a much younger age. Lane (1998) found that UK firms have a short-term focus and lack attention to training and development. A similar picture has emerged in the context of Chinese MNEs According to Shen and Darby (2004), Chinese MNEs manage international management development on an ad hoc basis because they lack formal schemes. Although good performance may lead to future promotion, the purpose of using expatriates is not for management development. No Chinese MNE holds a central record of all international managers or high-potential staff worldwide at headquarters. Instead the information on non-executive HCNs is filed only in the MNE's subsidiaries, so headquarters will know little about them. HCNs are included in management development schemes only at the subsidiary level and HCN managers are rarely promoted to senior management positions. No HCN or TCN has been transferred to headquarters or other international operations for the purposes of promotion and reassignment. Also, Black et al. (1999) revealed that the vast majority of expatriates' knowledge and experience gained through foreign assignments are not valued by US firms. The lack of long-term HR planning and training and ineffective international management development have resulted in difficulties in attracting high calibre HCNs and shortages of qualified PCN and HCN international managers. Many MNEs have experienced such difficulties.

Concluding remarks

International training and development is one of IHRM's most crucial activities and the potential benefits of effective training and development are widely acknowledged. By reviewing the existing literature and presenting the findings of his recent empirical research, the author argues that while there is growing recognition of the significance of international training and management development, the majority of MNEs do not pay adequate attention to training and developing international managers. It is customary for MNEs not to provide adequate pre-departure or post-arrival training for expatriates, spouses, partners or families, or training for HCNs and TCNs. When pre-departure training is provided, the training duration is normally short.

The major components of pre-departure training advocated in the literature include cultural awareness training, language training, orientation (briefing on host environments, job roles) and sensitivity training. Other components, mainly formal training courses, such as management and technical skills, have been suggested by academics, but not been well implemented. It has been argued that the components of training programmes should vary according to country of assignment, type of job, duration, purpose of transfer and the time available. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence showing MNEs are following this advice. There is also a general weakness in international management development, reflecting the lack of long-term strategic considerations and disregard for the potential value of individual working

experience. MNEs normally disconnect international experience from international management development. Therefore, based on the existing evidence it is concluded that there is a large gap between international training and development theory and how MNEs practice it in reality.

There are major implications for both HR practitioners and researchers. Currently, training and management policies and practices are ineffective and have resulted in frequently reported high expatriate failures and MNEs experiencing a severe shortage of international managers. In order to succeed in a globally competitive environment MNEs need to effectively train expatriates and their spouses, HCNs and TCNs, and develop and nurture a truly global management team. Moreover, this study reveals a lack of empirical studies on international training and development. The paucity of literature makes it difficult to draw more definitive conclusions on how MNEs have implemented international training and development. Academics need to conduct further research on how international training and development is being implemented by contemporary MNEs.

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