

Utilizing Online Social Networks for Expatriate's Families

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Abstract

The likelihood that an expatriate will succeed in an international assignment is positively correlated with his or her ability to adjust to the new locale. This adjustment process is heavily affected by the adjustment of the expatriate's spouse and other family members, who are often neglected when firms plan for an expatriate assignment. This paper uses networking theory to develop a model of how readily available technology, such as online social networks can provide support for expatriate's spouse and other family members. This support will aid in family members' adjustment while the expatriate is on assignment which in turn should aid in the expatriate's adjustment. By paying attention to spousal and family member social and informational needs, the proposed model can lower the risk associated with expatriate assignments which should enhance expatriate performance. This is an underexplored area, so this article highlights some insights for future research.

Keywords: Supportive online social networks; informational online social networks; international assignments; expatriate; family member adjustment; spousal adjustment; assignment adjustment; work performance

1. Introduction

International assignments are complex and risky endeavors, involving a host of factors that influence expatriate adjustment and job performance (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005). The expatriate's individual differences (e.g. self-efficacy, language skills), job factors (e.g. role clarity and discretion), and organizational factors (e.g. coworker and logistical support) all positively correlate with his/her adjustment and job performance (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Black & Mendenhall, 1991). However, non-work factors, specifically spousal and family adjustment, may exert the strongest influence on the expatriate adjustment, and ultimately his/her job performance.

1.1. The Importance of Family Support While on an International Assignment

Researchers and practitioners have long recognized the importance that spousal support, adjustment, and well-being have on the expatriate (Kupka & Cathro, 2007; Lee, H.-W., 2007; Sievers, 1998). Black & Mendenhall (1991) describe a U-shaped adjustment process, in which the initial excitement accompanying an international assignment gives way to doubts, confusion, stress, and despair when family members must learn and cope with unfamiliar foreign locales. Given that positive and negative influences in one domain affect other domains (Kahn, 1964; Madjar, Oldham, & Pratt, 2002), any difficulty that the spouse and family members have adjusting to the new environment will negatively affect the expatriate as well.

Furthermore, some research has looked at expatriate adjustment through the lens of family systems theory, which states that families are cultural systems that attempt to maintain a sense of equilibrium, so if one member is having adjustment problems, the equilibrium of the entire family is impacted (Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi, & Bross, 1998). Therefore it is not surprising that the premature return of expatriates has been linked to the inability of the spouse and family members to adjust to the new foreign environment (Fischlmayr & Kollinger, 2010). So, it is important to develop ways to improve family adjustment during international assignments.

One method for improving spousal and family member adjustment is through the use of social networks, which can lower the anxiety and depression caused by coping with new foreign locales (Lu, 1999). Social networks have helped employees adapt to massive and radical technological change (Bruque, Moyano, & Eisenberg, 2008; Lin, Ye, & Ensel, 1999b; Sykes, Venkatesh, & Gosain, 2009). Thus, the innovative use of technology, in the form of online social networks (e.g. Facebook), may be able to help spouses and family members better adjust to international assignments. Online social networks may provide an ideal mechanism by which spouses and family members can sustain social networks, both at home and in their new foreign location. Already, there is evidence that online networks like Facebook are readily accepted and used internationally (Green & Bailey, 2010). Some authors have stated that using online social networks is critical for global managers today (Molinsky, Davenport, Iyer, & Davidson, 2012), so why not their family members?

This article uses network theory to develop a model in which online social networks provide the information and support that spouses and family members need to adjust to international assignments. In that the costs and risks associated with international assignments continues to rise, it becomes even more critical that International Human Resource Management consider every available option toward improving expatriate adjustment and performance (Kupka & Cathro, 2007). This model, then, represents a workable, timely, and cost-effective proposal for improving the adjustment process of spouses and family members, which ultimately will result in improved expatriate adjustment and job performance.

1.2. How Can Online Social Networks Help Family's Adjust?

It has been acknowledged that social network disruption is an underexplored area in expatriation literature (Shen & Hall, 2009). Because spouse and family member adjustment are significantly correlated with expatriate adjustment and subsequent job performance (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005), the disruption to family member social networks requires inquiry as well. Past research indicates that spouses often have difficulty adjusting to international assignments, due in part to the lack of a social network (Briody & Chrisman, 1991). During the early stages of an international assignment, spouses and family members often find themselves in a state of cultural disorientation, in which many new life dynamics must be learned. For example, international assignments may require the learning of a new language, customs, and laws. Some cultures require that females appear in public only with suitable head covering, while negotiating simple day-to-day tasks, such as transportation, shopping, and attending school can be trying. In addition, spouses and family members often lose contact with friends and family members back home, heightening their sense of isolation and further impeding their adjustment process.

The expatriate situation described above is similar to other situations marked by radical change. Radical change often brings about heightened anxiety, uncertainty, and fear, because employees become insecure about their ability to survive in the future (Schweiger & Denisi, 1991). Such feelings can lead to increased stress, job dissatisfaction, and intentions to leave the organization (Schweiger & Denisi, 1991). Bruque et al. (2008) examined the effect that a radical change in technology and business processes had on employees in a financial firm, and found that two types of social networks – supportive and informational – helped employees adapt. Supportive social networks encourage members to share sentiments, seek understanding, vent frustration, and build self-esteem (Bruque et al., 2008; Lin et al., 1999b). Bruque et al. (2009) found that the size of an individual's supportive network is the most significant predictor of his/her ability to adapt to the IT-induced change. Supportive social networks can also be used to stay connected with friends, family, and events back home. Such networks can further improve psychological well-being by decreasing perceived stress and depression caused by isolation (Uchino, Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Bloor, 2004). These networks may be particularly relevant for expatriate family members, because social support has been negatively correlated with depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms (Lu, 1999).

Online social support networks (e.g. Facebook), in which network members use a digital medium to simulate and sustain a supportive social network, have been the focus of limited scholarly research. However, research has found that Facebook provides a means for freshman and sophomore level university students to feel more integrated into the social environment of the university (Morris, Reese, Beck, & Mattis., 2009-2010). Therefore, it is likely that the use of an online social network, simulating a supportive social network, will help family members adjust to their new foreign environment.

The other type of social network identified by Bruque et al. (2008) is informational, in which network members receive and provide concrete task- and job-related assistance (Bruque et al., 2008; Morrison, 2002). Informational networks help individuals reach higher levels of performance, because the network encourages information-sharing information, collaboration, and cooperation (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006). For the spouse and family members of expatriates, international assignments involve a host of questions, such as allowances for housing, clothing, and food, and finding schools for children (Baker & Roberts, 2006). Therefore, informational networks containing relevant information about the foreign location, specifically directed toward spouses and family members, would be enormously beneficial to their adjustment process. In addition, network members contributing facts, tips, and helps to informational networks often benefit as well, because his/her contributions often improve the contributor's sense of confidence, self-efficacy, and status within the network (Lin, Peek, Horwitz, & Scheid, 1999a; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). Therefore, informational social networks may be especially salient for the expatriate's spouse and family members, due to the dual benefit that both receiving and providing assistance can have. With regard to online informational social networks, again, there is little empirical research available to guide our propositions. However, to the extent that an electronic medium can successfully simulate and sustain the transmission and receipt of information, then an online informational network should be beneficial to family member adjustment to a new foreign environment.

It has been acknowledged that some of the "costs" of expatriation include family related issues, such as things like clothing allowances and food, but also schooling for children and spousal job assistance (Baker & Roberts, 2006). It is likely that both supportive online social networks and information online social networks would assist family members in these areas. For instance, with respect to supportive online social networks, a spouse may find other expatriate spouses to interact with if he/she is unable to work in the foreign country. Informational online social networks may also be of assistance to families if they are trying to uncover information about schools that children will attend when the family is abroad. Both situations would likely aid in the family adjustment.

While research on the children of expatriates is limited, a recent study developed a model based on interviews that indicated that teenagers of expatriates have different factors that influence their adjustment than expatriates and spouses; these factors included friends at school and school adjustment (Weeks, Weeks, & Willis-Muller, 2010). Both of these will likely be aided with access to online social networks.

Furthermore, both supportive and informational social networks should help in the creation of social capital for family members of expatriates. In particular, both may aid in the development of relational social capital, which includes norms of trust, identity, obligation, and expectation, and these norms will allow one to determine what is acceptable in the value system (Adler, 2001; Lee, R., 2009). This will contribute to the family member's understanding of how to act appropriately in a new culture, which should aid in adjusting to the assignment and location. Additionally, both types of social networks should also enhance cognitive social capital, which includes dimensions of shared language, codes, and narratives (Lee, R., 2009). These cognitive aspects of a new culture are important, because they help facilitate a shared understanding among those involved (Lee, R., 2009; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), which facilitates socio-psychosocial support (Lee, R., 2009; Starkey & Tempest, 2004). Therefore, supportive and informational social networks may further contribute to the family's adjustment to the assignment through the more rapid development of social capital.

Thus it is expected that:

Proposition 1: Higher levels of participation in supportive online social networks by family members of expatriates will lead to higher levels of assignment adjustment in family members.

Proposition 2: Higher levels of participation in informational online social networks of family members of expatriates will lead to higher levels of assignment adjustment in family members.

1.3. Family Member’s Adjustment and the Impact on the Expatriate

Spouses and family members are important constituents for organizations to consider when managing an international assignment (Lee, H.-W., 2007). Furthermore, it has been suggested that positive and negative influences in one domain affect stressors in other domains (Kahn, 1964; Madjar et al., 2002). Likewise, spillover theory states that home experience can influence an individual’s work life (Aldous, 1969; Caligiuri et al., 1998; Crouter, 1984). Even as far back as 1969 it has been acknowledge that the separation of the occupation and family spheres of a worker is a myth (Aldous, 1969). Therefore, if an international assignee has stress in the home environment then this stress will likely overflow into the work environment. Additionally, evidence suggests that the spouse’s general adjustment is significantly related to the expatriate adjustment (Nicholson & Imaizumi, 1993; Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999; Takeuchi, Seakhwa Yun, & Tesluk, 2002). One study even found evidence that a primary predictor of expatriate adjustment is spouse adjustment (Nicholson & Imaizumi, 1993).

It is also likely that adjustment of the children would also influence the adjustment of the expatriate. While research on children of international assignees is more limited, some interview data suggested that effective adjustment of adolescent children of expatriates may lead to the expatriate staying abroad longer (Weeks et al., 2010). Thus it is expected that:

Proposition 3: Higher levels of assignment adjustment in family members of expatriates will lead to higher levels of assignment adjustment for the expatriate.

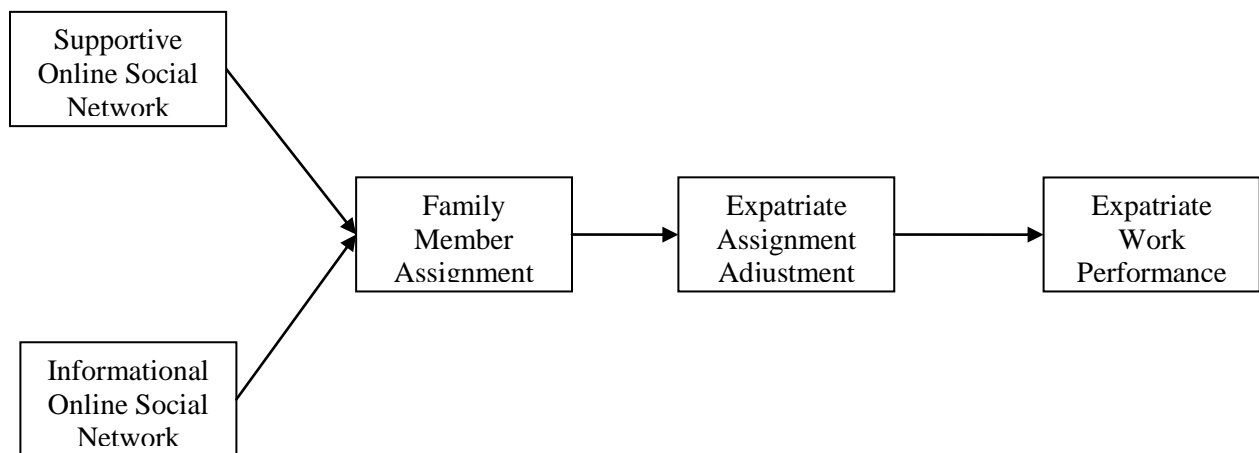
1.4. Expatriate Adjustment and Performance

A comprehensive meta-analysis found that expatriate adjustment had a positive relationship with work performance (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). Research has found that social support from the expatriate’s spouse had an accelerated influence on expatriate adjustment and performance (Lee, L. & Sukoco, 2008). Other research has found a positive relationship between adjustment and the organization’s bottom line (Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004). So while not necessarily new in the research, studies have found a link between international assignment adjustment and work performance. Therefore, it is anticipated that:

Proposition 4: Higher levels of expatriate assignment adjustment will lead higher levels of expatriate work performance.

Figure 1 displays the complete model of the relationships posited above.

Figure 1: Model of Support and Informational Social Networks



2. Discussion

Many expatriates are apprehensive about foreign assignments, because being "out of sight, out of mind" can harm careers (Shen & Hall, 2009), not to mention the toll that a foreign assignment can have on one's personal life (Lee, L. & Sukoco, 2008). It is likely that spouses and family members also feel disconnected from their previous networks while on assignment, and since family systems theory states that families are culture systems that seek to create a sense of equilibrium (Caligiuri et al., 1998), it is therefore important to look at family adjustment when examining the expatriate adjustment literature. Thus, this article provides the foundation for a valuable stream of research in the International Human Resource Management field, because it presents a new model demonstrating the impact that online social networks can have on the expatriate's family member adjustment to international assignments, and the subsequent impact on expatriate job performance.

As previously noted, not only is social network disruption an underexplored area of research in the expatriate literature (Shen & Hall, 2009), but there is scant literature on the impact of social networks on family members themselves. Therefore, organizations need to understand how they can assist family members adjusting to the assignment, so this model should provide some guidance. This is particularly important, because the inability of spouses and family members to adjust to foreign assignments has been linked to premature return of expatriates (Fischlmayr & Kollinger, 2010). This impacts performance, and becomes a costly problem for organizations.

The primary virtue of the proposed model is that it combines theoretically-based relationships with available technologies to help multinational organizations improve expatriate adjustment and job performance. Moreover, this model may be especially usable overseas, as approximately 70% of Facebook users are outside the United States (Green & Bailey, 2010). Thus, organizations may be well-served to utilize these networks for support and informational purposes.

The continuation and/or creation of social support networks during an international assignment is thought to be critical for spousal adjustment, which in turn affects expatriate adjustment (Kupka & Cathro, 2007). It is very likely that social support networks are critical to the children of expatriates as well, and because today's teenagers are the first to grow up using online social networks (Hempel & Lehman, 2005), they may benefit most from online supportive and informational social networks. With the increasing power and availability of online social networks, multinational organizations should consider how they can be best utilized to assist spousal and family member adjustment during and international assignment.

Some have acknowledged that International Human Resource Management needs to address the spousal issues of international assignments, by creating strategic initiatives that go beyond the basics of relocation issues to include assistance in maintaining and/or creating social networks (Kupka & Cathro, 2007). Additionally, we include a focus of online social networks, and extend our model to include children. Therefore, when testing this model, researchers should examine not just spouses but also the impact on children. In particular, it is critical for researchers to examine the impact of children's adjustment, since, as previously noted, scant research exists in this area. Therefore, this article provides a foundation for broadening the expatriate adjustment literature.

Organizations will have to consider how best to promote and manage supportive and informational online social networks. Creating a social network requires an investment time and effort (Shen & Hall, 2009), so managers will want to examine the expected return on investment in developing these networks. This may not be as cost effective as using already established online social network, such as Facebook, particularly since these networks are accepted and used around the world (Green & Bailey, 2010). If the network is provided by an outside vendor, the organization will not be able to control all of the aspects of it, but since many are already well developed, this may be a viable and cost efficient option. Then the organization can focus their efforts on connecting people and generating active participation. Especially since online social networks are only useful if members continue to participate; thus participation must be encouraged and rewarded (Jin, Cheung, Lee, & Chen, 2009).

If the organization decides to develop their own online social network, then management needs to consider that the success of online social networks is linked to participants finding the tools easy to use and useful (Davis, 1989; Legris, Ingham, & Colletette, 2003). Usefulness is the more important construct, which can be improved by ensuring that the system provides relevant information, proper knowledge-sharing capabilities, and by being transparent (Kleinschmidt, 2009).

Thus the development of online social networks in organizations will require some planning, and will incur some time and costs. This may also be a particularly challenging option because if the family members of the expats are already using specific online social networks, then they may not one to use an additional one. But this would allow the organization to have more control over the technology and allow them to create a system that meets their specific needs.

The decision to develop the online social network in-house or use an outside vendor may be guided by whether the network is supportive or informational. It may be that supportive online social networks, in which members share sentiments, look for understanding, and discuss frustration (Bruque et al., 2008; Lin et al., 1999b), may lend themselves to the already established networks. Conversely, informational online social networks, in which individuals acquire and provide concrete task related assistance (Bruque et al., 2008; Morrison, 2002), may be better established in house, in order to provide a more secure environment (i.e. protect confidential information or guard a competitive advantage) and to tailor the system to the needs of the particular organization and/or expatriate family members.

With either decision, the organization needs to consider how they are represented in the online social networks. Some note that there are risks and rewards that accompany the ability to quickly disseminate information (Lindroff, 2011). Additionally, as cases exist where individuals have been fired over their online postings (Pike, 2011), an organization will want to consider how these networks can be used properly, particularly since they will be used by family members of employees and not necessarily the employees themselves.

2.1. Limitations and Future Research

There are limits to the model presented. Some research indicates that cultural differences were found in what people posted on online social networks (Karl, Peluchette, & Schlaegel, 2010), therefore, future researchers should examine how cultural differences may impact the model presented. Another limitation of this article is that it does not address various types of adjustments that have been identified in other research, such as interaction adjustment or general adjustment (Andreason, 2008). Future researchers may want to explore each type of adjustment to see the impact of each type of online social network presented here.

Moreover, it is also possible that a direct relationship exists between the use of online social networks and expatriate adjustment. While this is a likely another valuable area to explore, it is beyond the scope of this paper, since we choose to focus specifically on the relationship between family members' adjustment and expatriate adjustment. Prior research has established the importance of spousal and family member adjustment with regard to expatriate adjustment, and there have been calls for a "multiple stakeholder view" in expatriate adjustment (Takeuchi, 2010). Nonetheless, we acknowledge that there are other influences on international assignment adjustment, which may include the expatriate's use of online social networks.

Finally, future research may want to examine how the strength of network ties and the centrality of the family member in the network effects adjustment. Both will likely impact the degree of adjustment for family members of the expatriates and organizations. Therefore researchers may be able to determine how best to not only position the family member in a network, but also how to ensure that the appropriate level of tie strength exists. This will further enhance the research on the impact of online social networks and family member adjustment.

Despite the above limitations, the model proposed in this article makes an important, timely, and workable contribution to both research and practice. Many firms place tremendous value on developing leaders who possess a multinational perspective, which requires expatriate assignments. Expatriates assignments are not only expensive, but also tremendously risky, due to the high number of failures. A primary cause of expatriate failure is the inability of spouses and family members to adjust to the overseas locale. Using prior research and existing technology, the model presented here can help spouses and family members better adjust to the foreign assignment, by providing necessary support and information. In helping spouses and family members, the firm will help itself, by improving the chances for expatriate adjustment and subsequent job performance.

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