

Cross-Cultural Training of Expatriates : A Qualitative Study of Indian Expatriates Abroad

Sunayana* and Nadia Ashraf Khan**

** CMS, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi*

*** CMS, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi*

Abstract

The present study is an investigation about the cross-cultural training requirements of Indian expatriates that are relocated to various countries across the globe on international assignments. While cross-cultural training has been identified as one of the most important antecedents of expatriate adjustment, satisfaction and commitment, barely any such study has been carried out in context of Indian expats. During the span of this study, from October 2018 to March 2019, 20 Indian expatriates were interviewed to assess the kind of training they received prior to their international assignment and the kind of training they actually found imperative for cross-cultural adjustments and successful completion of the same in the host country culture. Conclusions are drawn from respondent interviews and suggestions are made.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the whole wide world into a global village and a consequent internationalisation of the business world, organizations now take keen interest in making efforts to remain relevant not only in domestic markets but also across the globe. With multinational corporations establishing business units in multiple countries, an important concern for the management remains the need for personnel that are capable of managing successful overseas assignments. For such organizations, a constant challenge is to make sure the resources invested in such endeavours are best utilised in involving excellent human resources for the internationalization strategy, to establish the system structure of overseas subsidiaries and to take charge in the operation.

Expatriates employed overseas can have problems with adjustment in general, as well as with interaction with host country residents and the new work environment. One of the main issues multinational corporations face in their global operations is expatriate failure. Expatriate failure involves both monetary as well as psychological expenses for both the organization as well as the managers. The cost of sending employees to a foreign country is very high, up to five times the basic salary of the managers in the home country (Bennett, *et al.*, 2000; Collins, *et al.*, 2007). The expense of a failed expatriate project ranges between \$250,000 and \$1,000,000 (Vogel, *et al.*, 2008). One of the common reasons for the premature return of expats is their inability to adjust to the foreign culture. One important reason for this is lack of cross-cultural training prior to the assignment. Therefore, it makes it imperative for academicians, policy makers as well as organizations to understand this important factor that increases the possibility of successful completion of expatriate assignments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross-cultural Training and its Dimensions

Training is defined as an intervention that aims at increasing the knowledge and skills of individuals so as to help them cope better personally, work more effectively with others and perform better professionally (Kealey & Protheroe, 1996). (Li & Zizzi, 2017) suggested that cross-cultural training helped people in handling unexpected situations in a foreign environment which aids their cross-cultural adjustment. Cross-cultural adjustment is the degree of psychological comfort and familiarity a person has working with the new culture (Black, 1988; Black, *et al.*, 1991). The purpose of cross-cultural training is to help members of one culture to interact effectively with members of another culture, and to predispose them to a rapid adjustment to their new environment.

Cross-cultural training effectively assists an expatriate in adjusting to the new environment, reduces cultural shock, and ensures effective execution of overseas tasks (Abdullah, *et al.*, 2015). As put forth by (Reddington, *et al.*, 2015), "For an international manager, cross-cultural training could help understand the value of different culture, enhance cultural sensitivity, promote cultural perception, enhance the cooperation among teams with different culture, and enhance the communication and co-ordination abilities among different cultures". (Goldstein & Keller, 2015) suggested that effective cultural training allows an expatriate's rapid adjustment in the host country culture, and assists an expatriate in better understanding of the cultural differences and therefore, in

applying the knowledge to manage affairs in the cross-cultural environment. (Sorrells, 2015) put forth the idea that the training should be work and task oriented, when there are low cultural interaction with the host country and when the cultural difference between the home and the host country is not grave, hence, the training methods should be less strict. However, (Mayring, 2015) mentioned that, when the cultural interaction with the host country is high and the cultural difference between the home and the host country is large, the training should be stricter, with focus on imparting cross-cultural skills and the ability to execute in the new environment.

(Li, 2018) proposed three dimensions of cross-cultural training, namely : cultural, language and practical training. Cultural training should involve basic knowledge about the host country to understand the differences in cultures and develop respect for the same. Language training involves training in English as well as the local language of the host country. Knowing the local language helps the expatriates to communicate well with the local people and further facilitates an understanding of the host country in acquiring political, economic, and market information. The third dimension is the practical training which refers to assisting the expatriates and their families in integrating with the local life, e.g. making friends, banking, shopping, and travelling, so that the overseas expatriates successfully adjust to the new environment.

(Chen & Chiu, 2018) carried out an empirical study, results of which revealed that cross-cultural training has a positive effect on the organizational commitment among expatriates which in turn shows a remarkable positive effect on their work adjustment. Hence, establishing a positive relationship between cross-cultural training and work related adjustment of expatriates.

Cross-cultural Training : Classification and Techniques

(Brislin, 1979) identified and presented three techniques for cross-cultural training; cognitive, affective, and behavioural approach. The cognitive approach involves non-participative sessions of training on the foreign cultural environment (Waxin & Panaccio, 2005). The affective technique aims at provoking individual reactions so the trainees learn to deal with critical incidents relating to the culture of the host country while the behavioural method focuses on improving the trainees' ability to adapt to the host country's communication style and to establish positive relationships with the local host country nationals (Waxin & Panaccio, 2005).

(Tung, 1981) gave a classification of five basic training programs for cross-cultural training. They are : (1) didactic training, (2) culture assimilation,

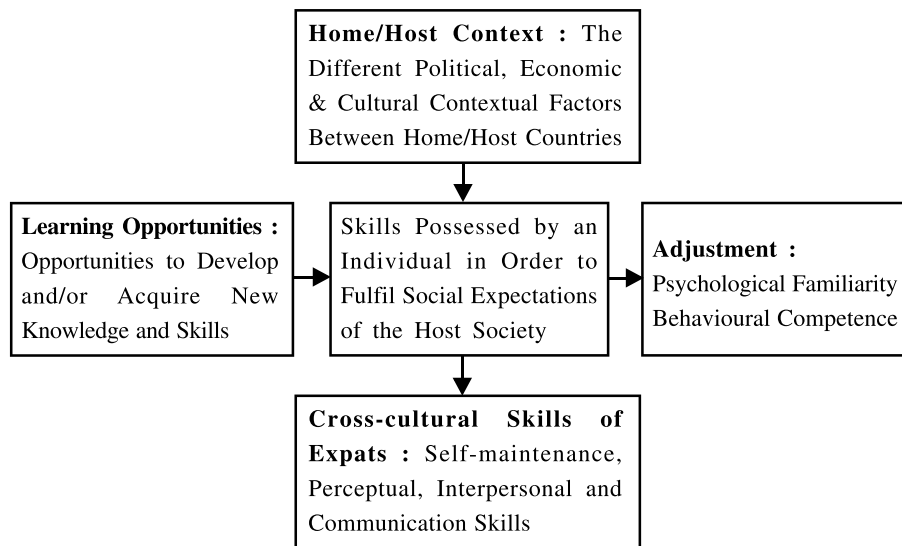
(3) language training, (4) sensitivity training, and (5) field experience. According to him, the training method should be chosen based on the type of assignment and should be determined on the basis of two factors of cultural distance (between the culture of origin and the host culture), and the degree of interpersonal interaction (between the expatriate manager and the host country nationals).

(Earley, 1987) argued that cross-cultural training has a positive effect on both expatriate managerial performance as well as the adjustment to the host country culture. (Hammer & Martin, 1992) also came to similar conclusions after studying American managers in Japan, confirming the effectiveness of cross-cultural training in reducing the anxiety and uncertainty among expat managers while (Okpara & Kabongo, 2017) also confirmed the findings by other researchers, stating how positively the cross-cultural training of expatriates affected not only work adjustment but also the other two facets of general and expatriate adjustment.

Cross-cultural training also reduces turnover and enhances satisfaction and performance levels among managers and also encourages them to extend their assignments or take new ones in future (Kassar, *et al.*, 2015).

Literature on cross-cultural training for expatriates identifies four universal sets of cross-cultural skills namely; maintenance skills, perceptual skills,

Figure 1
A Person-Culture Congruence Model of Expatriate Skills Adapted from (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004)

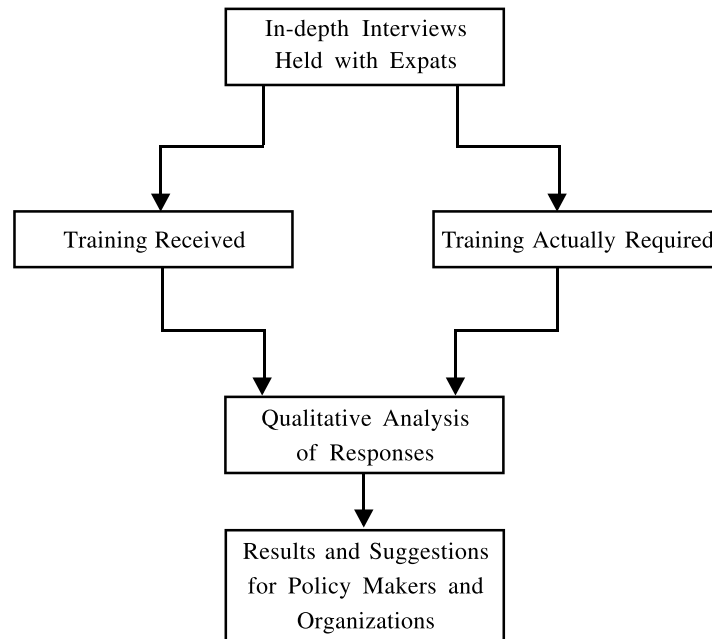


interpersonal skills and communication skills (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). Self-maintenance skills refer to skills needed in order to deal with stress, self-confidence issues (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985), isolation, negativity, anxiety and frustration in the new culture. Perceptual skills refer to processing unfamiliar situations and different human behaviours in the foreign culture (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). Relationship dimension encompasses skills to enhance interactions with host country nationals (Chew, 2004; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). These skills help in fostering relationships. Lastly, communication skills encompass language ability, skills to communicate effectively in the host country environment (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). Hence, according to the model by (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004), cross-cultural adjustment is determined by a 'person-culture' congruence. In simpler terms it means the expatriates need to acquire and develop the above mentioned four sets of skills in order to adjust in the host country.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with 20 Indian expatriate managers over a span of six months from October 2018 to March 2019 with the help of a structured interview protocol. The interview protocol was divided into two parts. The first part was about the demographic profile covering questions about age, tenure in the organization, previous international experience and host country. The second part focussed on training related questions, the kind of training they received prior to relocation and what areas they wished they were trained in intensively before moving overseas. In-depth interviews are an important tool for qualitative research because they help collect rich practical data (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). In qualitative method studies, individual cases are studied with regard to their environment and the focus is on describing a phenomenon (Laura, 2012). Experiences were recorded and qualitatively analysed. The respondents, however, have been kept anonymous as per their wishes. The respondents were expats relocated to United States of America, Germany, Austria, Mexico, England, Kenya and United Arab Emirates. Some of them were accompanied by spouses while others went alone. The interviews were conducted in English. The respondents were young with an average age of 32 years. 50% of the respondents had a previous international experience and 90% of them had worked overseas for more than two years.

Figure 2
Research Framework for the Study



EXPERIENCES OF RESPONDENTS

Even though all the assignments were successfully carried out right till the end, the respondents had to overcome many obstacles during their stay overseas. The interviews revealed the need for intensive and customised pre-departure training programs as well as organizational support on arrival in the host location. Most of the problems the expats faced were linked to the cultural differences between the home and host countries. One of the major areas identified which needs rigorous training is language as pointed out by those relocated to the Arab countries, Germany and Austria and Mexico. It may be because these countries do not prefer the use of English language over their local or national language while in USA, Kenya and England, English is the work language.

A respondent on an assignment to Austria, when asked about what he wished to have known better before relocation, stated :

"If you are sent on a year long assignment, you must interact with people from other departments, technicians etc. who do not necessarily speak

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

S. No.	Age in Years	Gender	Host Country Experience	Accompanied by Partner/Spouse	Previous International Experience
1.	28	M	USA	No	Yes
2.	30	M	USA	No	No
3.	30	M	USA	Yes	No
4.	28	M	England	No	No
5.	30	M	Austria	No	Yes
6.	27	M	Kenya	No	No
7.	31	M	Germany	No	No
8.	30	M	USA	No	Yes
9.	35	M	Mexico	Yes	Yes
10.	33	M	UAE	Yes	No
11.	28	M	Germany	No	Yes
12.	29	M	Germany	No	Yes
13.	29	M	Austria	No	No
14.	31	M	Germany	No	Yes
15.	28	M	USA	No	No
16.	28	M	Mexico	Yes	No
17.	28	F	Kenya	No	Yes
18.	27	F	England	Yes	Yes
19.	31	M	UAE	Yes	No
20.	28	M	USA	Yes	Yes

the common language English and hence, there are hurdles in communication. Your spouse also cannot adjust and fit into the community if he/she doesn't speak the local language."

Another respondent stated :

"During my stay in Germany I realised, you will not be able to put in 100% effort in your work if you do not know the language, even if you want to. It is important to have some social etiquette training, training in non- verbal communication and to know what's acceptable in their culture and what's not."

"It was difficult to go even grocery shopping without knowing at least a few common words and phrases", stated an Indian expatriate in UAE.

A respondent from Germany went ahead to state :

"While I was yet to receive a permanent housing arrangement, I stayed in a hotel where I learnt that you were supposed to make the bed yourself. I asked the hotel staff to do it and it was weird." While another manager stated how strictly unacceptable it was to make jokes in the work setting as opposed to that in the USA.

An expat from Mexico stated that the pre-departure language training imparted by the parent company was too short and inadequate. Hence, adequate language training, non-verbal communication training as well as training in social behaviour is crucial in the adjustment of expatriates and need to be taught prior to relocation.

"There was a situation when my boss asked me for coffee. I replied I was good and turned him down only to realise later that he wanted to talk about my work performance. In American culture that's how your boss will initiate if he wants to talk about your work."

The organizations should ensure training for the accompanying partner/spouse as well, to ensure easier adaptability and adjustment of the spouse, which spills over to the expatriate's adjustment process (Black & Stephens, 1989). Expatriates from Mexico stated how they would have appreciated "practical information about travelling, safety, climate and support in housing and education options like schooling for children as none of this was included in their training program.

Interviewees from Kenya pointed out the importance of "knowledge regarding the social background, history and social situation of the place as well as a political understanding especially when the host country is culturally so distant from the parent country."

For expatriates moving to the US or UK, work and work ethic-related training was considered very important. They pointed out the need for training on how to work in a team environment and hold a team together, how to play leadership roles in a multicultural workplace and highlighted the need for technical job-related training. They also laid emphasis on training in social norms and etiquette. "Some countries encourage task and goal oriented approach at work places with a strict mechanical work ethic while in others there is a more free and friendly workplace atmosphere, and pre-departure trainings need to equip expatriates with such information."

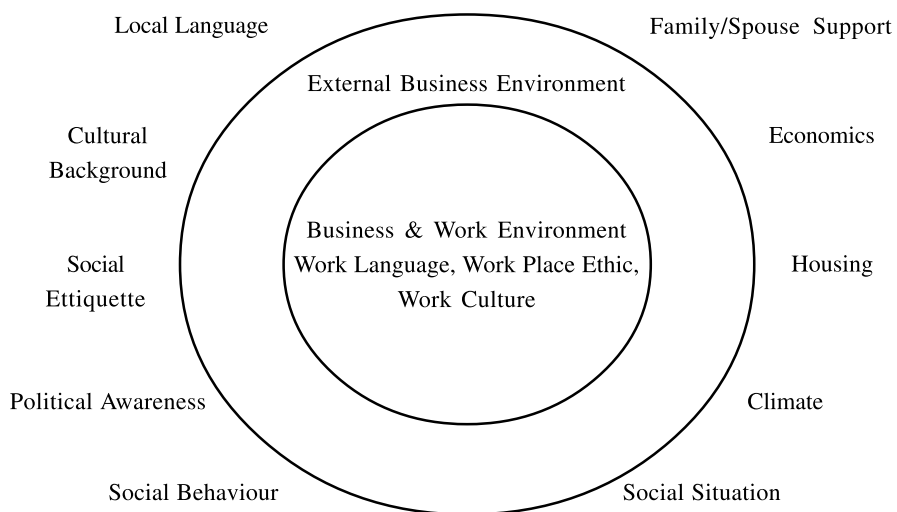
Another very important idea presented by all the interviewees was that the parent organization should help expatriates establish networks with the existing expat community in the host country. This would enable them to learn

from the experiences previous expats have had and it would be enriching for both the expatriate as well as the accompanying partner.

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The findings of the present study are in conformation with previous studies (Brislin, 1979; Selmer, 2005; Simeon, 2000; Teague, 2015; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004) and the theoretical framework, thereof, the study is reliable. The study revealed a number of interesting details. While organizations that send expatriates on international assignments do provide short duration training courses in host country oriented work language, work ethics and workplace culture, there is a need to look at the business and such assignments through a prism of openness with respect to the environment in which the business operates. Expatriates need training not only to adjust in the closed work environment but also need facilitation from both parent as well as host country organization to be able to interact with the host culture, host country nationals, way of life, housing, travel, support for family and spouses and cultural and social awareness about the foreign country. The study found support for training requirements of Indian expatriates before relocation to overseas as well as organizational support after arrival at the host country

Figure 3
Training Requirements with Respect to Internal and External Business Environment in Order to Facilitate General Adjustment, Work Adjustment as well as Interaction Adjustment



location. The most important finding is that while firms do provide training in host country language but it is inadequate and too short-lived to provide expats with the required level of skills for cross-cultural adjustment. The training should be prolonged and extensive and should cover the partner/family of the expatriate as well. The important areas that need the attention of employers are role training, conflict resolution, global leadership training, interpersonal communication, cultural awareness, political intelligence and work/business ethics.

Firms should encourage imparting training by previous expatriates and should carry out reasonable duration programs on the practical living conditions at the host location. It is necessary to provide help and support in the adjustment of accompanying partners and children. Respondents pointed out the need for preliminary visit to the host location. Since this will incur huge costs to the company, employers should rather create detailed awareness on all aspects of the host culture including history, politics, geography, climate, social set-up, security and the economy of the place. A very important approach would be critical incident training as it equips the managers to handle and deal with culturally unique incidents in the foreign country. All the training requirements, hence, identified should ensure successful accomplishment of assignments and saved failure costs for the organizations. Training programs need to be the focus of such companies right after selecting the managers for relocation, failure or inadequacy of which renders them ineffective

References

- Abdullah, M. C.; Adebayo, A. S.; and Talib, A. R. (2015), Relationship Between Demographic Factors, Social Support and Sociocultural Adjustment Among International Post Graduate Students In A Malaysian Public University, *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 5(2), p. 87.
- Bennett, R.; Aston, A.; and Colquhoun, T. (2000), Cross-cultural Training : A Critical Step in Ensuring the Success of International Assignments, *Human Resource Management*, 39(2), pp. 239-250.
- Black, J. (1988), Work Role Transitions : A Study of American Expatriate Managers in Japan, *Journal of International Business Studies*, 19(2), pp. 277-94.
- Black, J.; Mendenhall, M.; and Oddou, G. (1991), Towards a Comprehensive Model of International Adjustment : An Integration of Multiple Theoretical Perspectives, *Academy of Management Review*, 16(2), pp. 291-317.
- Black, J. S.; and Mendenhall, M. (1990), Cross-Cultural Training Effectiveness : A Review and a Theoretical Framework for Future Research, *Academy of*

- Management Review*, 15(1), pp. 113-136.
- Black, J. S.; and Stephens, G. K. (1989), The Influence of the Spouse on American Expatriate Adjustment and Intent to Stay in Pacific Rim Overseas Assignments, *Journal of Management*, 15(4), pp. 529-544.
- Brislin, R. W. (1979), Orientation Programs for Cross-cultural Preparation. In : A. Marcella, G. Tharp & T. Ciborowski, eds. *Perspectives on Cross-Cultural Psychology*. Orlando : Academic Press, pp. 287-304.
- Chen, K. C.; and Chiu, Y. J. (2018), Development of the Cross-cultural Training on Organizational Commitment and Work Adjustment in Environmental Services Industry : The Impact of Relatedness, *Ekoloji*, 27(106), pp. 241-247.
- Chew, J. (2004), Managing MNC Expatriates through Crises : A Challenge for International Human Resource Management, *Research and Practice in Human Resource Management*, 12(2), pp. 1-30.
- Collins, D. G.; Scullion, H.; and Morley, M. J. (2007), Changing Patterns of Global Staffing in the Multinational Enterprise : Challenges to the Conventional Expatriate Assignment and the Emerging Alternatives, *Journal of World Business*, 42(2), pp. 198-213.
- Earley, P. C. (1987), Intercultural Training for Managers : A Comparison of Documentary and Interpersonal Methods, *Academy of Management Journal*, 30(4), pp. 685-698.
- Goldstein, S. B.; and Keller, S. R. (2015), U.S. College Students' Lay theories of Culture Shock, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Volume 47, pp. 187-194.
- Hammer, M. R.; and Martin, J. N. (1992), The Effects of Cross-Cultural Training on American Managers in a Japanese-American Joint Venture, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 20(2), pp. 161-182.
- Kassar, A. N.; Rouhana, A.; and Lythreathis, S. (2015), Cross-cultural Training : Its Effects on the Satisfaction and Turnover of Expatriate Employees, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 80(4), pp. 4-11.
- Kealey, D. J.; and Protheroe, D. R. (1996), The Effectiveness of Cross-cultural Training for Expatriates : An Assessment of the Literature on the Issue, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 20(2), pp. 141-165.
- Laura, K. (2012), *Expatriation and Cross-Cultural Training*, Berlin : University of Applied Sciences.
- Lindolf, T. R.; and Taylor, B. C. (2002), *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Li, S.; and Zizzi, S. (2017), The Influence of Physical Activity on International Graduate Students' Cross-Cultural Adjustment: A Qualitative Longitudinal Study, *Graduate Journal of Sport, Exercise & Physical Education Research*, Volume 4, pp. 43-59.

- Li, Y. (2018), Effects of the Application of Mobile Learning to Criminal Law Education on Learning Attitude and Learning Satisfaction, *EURASIA Journal of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education*, 14(7), pp. 3355-3362.
- Mayring, P. (2015), *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse : Grundlagen und Techniken*, 12th Ed. Germany : Belts and Padagogik.
- Mendenhall, M.; and Oddou, G. (1985), The Dimensions of Expatriate Acculturation : A Review, *Academy of Management Review*, 10(1), pp. 39-47.
- Okpara, J. O.; and Kabongo, J. D. (2017), The Effect of Cross-cultural Training on Expatriates' Adjustment, *Journal of Management Development*, 36(9), pp. 1114-1124.
- Reddington, L. A.; Perverly, S. T.; and Block, C. J. (2015), An Examination of Some of the Cognitive and Motivation Variables Related to Gender Differences in Lecture Note-taking, *Reading and Writing*, 28(8), pp. 1155-1185.
- Selmer, J. (2005), Cross-cultural Training and Expatriate Adjustment in China : Western Joint Venture Managers, *Personnel Review*, 34(1), pp. 68-84.
- Simeon, R.; and F. K. (2000), Cross-cultural Adjustment Strategies of Japanese Spouses in Silicon Valley, *Employee Relations*, 22(6), pp. 594-611.
- Sorrells, K. (2015), *Intercultural Communication : Globalization and Social Justice*, Second ed. Northridge : Sage Publications.
- Teague, J. (2015), Corporate Preparation for the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Experience of the Accompanying Expatriate Spouse, *Journal of International Business Research*, 14(2), p. 139.
- Tung, R. L. (1981), Selection and Training of Personnel for Overseas Assignments, *Columbia Journal of World Business*, 16(1), pp. 68-78.
- Vogel, A. J.; Van Vuuren, J. J.; and Millard, S. M. (2008), Preparation, Support and Training Requirements of South African Expatriates, *South African Journal of Business Management*, 39(3), pp. 33-40.
- Waxin, M. F.; and Panaccio, A. (2005), Cross-cultural Training to Facilitate Expatriate Adjustment : It Works!, *Personnel Review*, 34(1), pp. 51-68.
- Yamazaki, Y.; and Kayes, D. C. (2004), An Experiential Approach to Cross-Cultural Learning : A Review and Integration of Competencies for Successful Expatriate Adaptation, *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 3(4), pp. 362-379.