

Suplemento / Supplement

An evaluation of female expatriate managers' efficacy

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■ *Introduction*

In recent years, business operations have become increasingly internationalized. This phenomenon has resulted in a greater number of managers being sent abroad. In fact, it is estimated that over 100,000 expatriates are relocated to work in the United States alone each year (Micco, 1998). From the company's perspective, the importance of a manager's successful performance overseas cannot be underestimated. Nowadays, corporate earnings generated abroad account for more than 40% of company revenues (Windham International, 1999). As global operations become strategically more important, so does the role of the managers in charge of these operations abroad. Now more than ever, there is a need to hire the most qualified and talented managerial staff to occupy international job posts.

The growing internationalization of business operations has not been accompanied by an equally proportionate number of male and females occupying global positions. In fact, women continue to be grossly underrepresented in management positions abroad. In the late 1980's, Jelinek and Adler (1988) estimated that women occupied less than 3% of international management positions. The situation seems to have improved at least moderately so in the past decade. Florkowski and Fogel's (1995) study of 225 expatriates from a variety of countries revealed that 11% of the respondents were female. More recently, Tung's (1997) study of 409 U.S. expatriates found that 13.9% of respondents

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were female. Despite these moderate improvements in the number of women occupying managerial posts abroad, there still exists a significant lack of female managers overseas. Indeed, the poor representation of expatriate women managers stand in marked contrast to the gains made by women in obtaining management positions in the domestic arena. A recent study conducted by the Families and Work Institute (as cited in Shellenbarger, 2003), a New York nonprofit consulting and research group, discovered that 39% of women in the U.S. hold executive, administrative and managerial positions, up 12% from 1977.

The under-representation of women in international managerial positions is significant in three important regards. First, it is highly unethical to exclude women from consideration for international posts based on one's own perception that they might not be interested. Adler's (1986) study of one thousand graduating MBA's from top schools in the U.S. proved that this perception is in fact erroneous. Her results indicated that male and female MBA's displayed equal interest in pursuing international careers.

Second, the under-representation of women in international job assignments is significant in as much as these postings often are a requisite for promotion to the highest level positions within a company back at home (Black *et al.*, 1992). Mendenhall and Oddou's (1991) survey of expatriates indicated that international assignments provide managers with tangible professional experience including an increase in global awareness, greater cross cultural communication skills and deeper understanding of business trends. Thus, a female manager which is not considered for an international post might in effect also be excluded from the pool of qualified candidates for senior level positions in the company domestically precisely because she lacks the skills and experience that an international posting could have provided her. This in turn only exacerbates the current under-representation of female managers in top corporate positions in the domestic arena. In fact, as of 2002, only 15.7% of corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies were women (Catalyst, 2002).

Finally, greater representation by women in international managerial posts is important since women are a highly qualified and talented labor pool. In today's competitive global economy multinationals cannot afford to exclude women from international posts; in sum, the cost is just too high (Adler, 1994). As one author aptly summarized, "no company can afford to waste valuable brainpower simply because it is wearing a skirt" (Fisher, 1992, p. 56). Moreover, studies have revealed that female managers possess qualities that render them uniquely suitable for the rigors and challenges of an international assignment.

Among the perceived advantages of being a female expatriate include greater "visibility" and less chance of being perceived as a threat by host nationals. To a lesser degree, more contentious claims have been made that women are more relationship centered and have stronger human relations skills both of which are important criteria for overseas assignments (Westwood and Leung, 1994).

The purpose of this paper is to examine one of the principal myths regarding the aforementioned phenomenon: Why don't more women occupy international management posts? More specifically, it looks at one specific variable that has been set forth by organizations with international operations as a reason for excluding female managers: their perceived ineffectiveness on the job overseas. This will be assessed by reviewing relevant research on the issue from two important perspectives: that of the U.S. female expatriate manager herself (through self-assessment measures) and that of potential or actual colleagues.

At this point, it is useful to set forth definitions of terms that will be used repeatedly throughout this article. First and foremost is that of efficacy, which will be defined as "having the power or the ability to produce a desired effect on the job". As mentioned earlier, this will be assessed from two perspectives, that of the U.S. female manager herself and that of host nationals. Moreover, expatriate will refer to: any employee who has been sent to live and work in a foreign country. Finally, a host country national signifies all business people native to the country where the foreign company is conducting business.

■ *Literature review*

From the perspective of the expatriate herself, female managers are indeed effective on overseas posts. For example, Jelinek and Adler (1988) conducted a survey of 52 U.S. female expatriate managers returning from overseas assignments in Asia. The majority (71%) of the women were sent to Asia by financial institutions, while the others worked for industries as diverse as publishing and petroleum. On average, their expatriate assignments lasted two and a half years. According to Adler and Jelinek, 97% of the U.S. female expatriates reported their performance as being "effective" (Jelinek and Adler, 1988). While these reports are undeniably subjective in nature, Jelinek and Adler set forth two important pieces of evidence that would suggest that their testimonies were in fact accurate: first, most firms decided to send another women abroad after the first experience with a female expatriate and second, many companies chose to offer the female expatriate a sec-

ond posting after her first assignment terminated (Jelinek and Adler, 1988).

According to the authors, not only did the gender of these female expatriates not impede their efficacy on the job, for 42% of the women it actually proved to be an advantageous factor working in favor of their business dealings (Jelinek and Adler, 1988).

Among the advantages reported by the U.S. female expatriates include: great visibility, strong human relation skills and a special treatment not demonstrated to their male counterparts. Perhaps the most significant finding of their research was how the male host national colleagues viewed them. Jelinek and Adler (1988) detailed how the female managers perceived that they were viewed more as “foreigners” instead of as local women whose involvement in managerial responsibilities would not have been condoned.

Taylor and Napier’s (1996) survey of ninety one foreign female professionals working in Japan yielded similar results attesting to the efficacy of female expatriates on the job. On a five point scale with 5 representing “completely adjusted”, the women ranked their adjustment to their work situation a 3.8, a score similar to those of their male counterparts. The women also gave themselves a 3.5 on a 5 point scale concerning job performance abroad (Taylor & Napier, 1996). According to the authors of this study, these women felt strongly that they had performed well on the job.

Like Jelinek and Adler, these authors discovered that the foreign women interviewed had enjoyed unique advantages of being a woman on the job overseas. For example, their responses reiterated the point about greater visibility and memorability on the part of their Japanese colleagues because they were in fact women. Many women also underscored their skills for interpersonal relationships such as being courteous or asking about a client’s personal matters or family. In addition, many women reported their greater ability to adapt as outsiders as being another unique advantage enjoyed by the women. As Taylor and Napier explain (1996), women are more accustomed to being outsiders in the corporate world, so exclusion from the traditional Japanese corporate networks was less of a shock for them (p. 81).

Evaluating the efficacy of the female expatriate manager based on a self assessment of her own work provides at best a partial view of her performance on the job abroad. In order to gain a more complete picture of the female manager’s performance it is necessary to take into account the opinions of host nationals as well. According to Stone (1991), there is considerable doubt on the part of host national’s about the efficacy of

female expatriates in top positions. In a survey conducted in 1987 and 1988 of 60 Australian, New Zealand, British and American firms with operations in South Asia, the authors found that 60% of the local managers surveyed did not see foreign women as suitable in top management positions. In addition, 53% agreed with the statement that "Given two people of equal ability, it was preferable to appoint a man to an international position". (p.15) Moreover, 53% of Asian managers surveyed stated that foreign women managers were not appropriate for countries such as Japan and Korea (Stone, 1991). In sum, considerable prejudice does in fact exist towards foreign female managers doing business in Asia. This would appear to support the belief that women are not chosen for international assignments out of fear that discrimination on the part of host nationals might impede their efficacy on the job.

Izraeli's 1980 study examining the attitudes of executives from 111 companies from England, Holland, Belgium, France and Germany toward female expatriate multinational subsidiary heads yielded similar results. These executives represented a wide variety of industries, including: agricultural products (39), banking (29) industrial products (24) and tourism and transportation (19). When asked whether the executives felt that a well-qualified woman could successfully manage and head a multinational subsidiary herself 60.7% agreed that women could head a subsidiary (Izraeli, 1980). Presumably, however, almost 40% held an opposing point of view. The author found little statistical difference between host countries or different industries, lending credence to the belief that discrimination towards woman as expatriate managers does in fact exist and it is not limited to one particular industry or geographic region.

Follow up interviews conducted by Izraeli (1980) yielded considerable insight into why respondents felt apprehensive about having a woman heading a multinational subsidiary. For one, the respondents expected that the foreign women would meet with a great deal of resistance from host national colleagues, supervisors and subordinates. According to the author, three important concerns emerged to explain this. The first relates to the issue of illegitimacy of authority. For example, some of the respondents tended to view authority as a masculine trait, so that a female executive who tried to exercise authority would not have the same impact as a man. One respondent explained, "A woman's opinion just doesn't carry the same weight as that of a man, unless she is very exceptional". (p. 58). The second factor deals with lack of role models and lack of direct experience working with female subsidiary heads. Many of those who thought a well-qualified woman could not head a

multinational subsidiary had in fact never worked with one. In contrast, those who had experience with female subsidiary heads were much more open to the idea, presumably because they had positive experiences beforehand. Finally, some respondents who had viewed a female managing a subsidiary as difficult expressed concern over the seeming incongruence between being a female manager and her family status. On the one hand, they viewed a single, female executive as problematic because she would be too vulnerable to the rigors of an international assignment. At the same time, they also feared that sending married female executive would be difficult because she would have to drag her spouse with her from subsidiary to subsidiary causing marital woes and ultimately distraction from her professional duties (Izraeli, 1980).

Cordano *et al.*'s study (2002) of Chilean business students attitudes towards female managers yielded results similar to those of Izraeli and Stone. In this study, the authors surveyed 412 undergraduate business administration students: 194 from a large U.S. university and 218 from a large university in Chile. The students were asked to complete the 21 item WAMS (Women as Managers Scale) in their native languages to measure their views towards foreign female managers. Their results showed a statistically significant difference between Chilean male students' perception of a female manager's ability and potential acceptance and that of their U.S. counterparts (Cordano, 2002). Among the four groups surveyed (comprised of male and female students from each culture), U.S. females held the most favorable attitudes toward female managers while male Chilean students of business held the least favorable. While these attitudes were reflective of students and not actual business people *per se*, they are nonetheless indicative in as much as they call attention to the less than accepting attitudes of host nationals which may directly or indirectly impede a female expatriate manager's adjustment process and/or impact her efficacy on the job.

Sinangil and Ones' (2003) study of host country national coworker evaluations of 193 expatriates working in Turkey yielded results that are dramatically different from those of Stone, Izraeli, and Cordano. In their study, host country nationals were asked to complete a 45 item job performance evaluation rating their foreign female expatriate colleague. In total, 165 males and 29 females were evaluated on their performance on the job by a host national colleague in a variety of dimensions including: technical competence, communicating and persuading, interpersonal relations and job productivity. In 137 of the cases this colleague was a superior; in 55 cases it was a coworker and in eight cases it was a subordinate. The expatriates themselves were a diverse

group from 69 different countries working in a broad array of industries, including: manufacturing, financing, petroleum, and telecommunications, among others.

Sinangil and Ones' (2003) study revealed that male and female expatriates obtained similar job performance ratings from their host national colleagues. In fact, it is interesting to note that in eight out of ten of the job performance dimensions evaluated by the host nationals, women achieved higher ratings than their male counterparts, albeit slightly. No statistical difference was found between male and female expatriates in the realm of adjustment to foreign business practices while males received a slightly higher rating in the area of technical competence. In sum, Sinangil and Ones found no evidence to substantiate the belief that female managers are ineffective on overseas assignments.

■ *Conclusion*

This article has examined relevant research about the efficacy of foreign female managers on international assignments. It has revealed findings that at first glance might appear to be contradictory. On the one hand, findings by Jelinek and Adler and Taylor and Napier suggest that female expatriate managers when asked to self evaluate their performance feel that they were successful on their international assignments. On the other hand, findings by Stone, Izraeli and Cordano suggest that host nationals do not feel that females can effectively perform on an international assignment and thus should not hold management positions overseas. It is important to note that the latter are perceptions of host nationals who may or may not have actually had the opportunity to work with a female manager in an international context. Sinangil and One's findings reveal that host country nationals who have worked directly with female managers do in fact feel they were effective. This is very insightful in as much as it clarifies what appears to be contradictory information. While many host nationals continue to doubt the efficacy of female expatriate managers, those that have actually worked with them feel they did their job well. This supports the female managers own positive assessment of their job done abroad.

It is important to recognize the limitations of these research findings. Given the small sample sizes used in most of the studies examined, it would be erroneous to try to generalize based on any of these findings. The fact is that so few women occupy international posts that it is a real challenge to amass a significant group of them to make the sample of a size sufficient enough so that it could be truly representative. More-

over, in most of the literature reviewed, just one country or geographical region was represented, and the foreign women working there came from all over the globe, therein limiting the possibility of generalizing to other regions of the world or about the acceptance of foreign managers from a specific country. In addition, all of the studies examined take into account either the self assessment on the part of the female expatriate or the host national evaluation of the female expatriate. As this article has shown, one can not assume that the results are synonymous from the two perspectives, especially given the inherent problems of objectivity that plague self assessment instruments. Moreover, it is important to recognize that the studies encompassing this research fail to take into account, without exception, the other explanatory variables that could just as well have explained the female expatriates' efficacy abroad including individual characteristics such as language skills or open-mindedness, family factors and support from the sponsoring organization, all of which are at least important as gender in predicting an individual managers' success overseas (Caligiuri & Tung, 1999).

The implications of these findings are widespread. Multinationals looking to remain globally competitive stands to benefit considerably from sending a female manager on an international assignment, and thus should undertake a concerted effort to send a greater number of qualified female managers abroad. However, female managers sent on overseas assignments must be prepared to encounter host national colleagues whose perceptions of their effectiveness are less than favorable. This will necessitate a greater effort on the part of the multinational to provide specialized training for female managers prior to departure in order to enable them to be effective. Taylor and Napier (1996) suggest that training women beforehand to deal with and distance themselves from potentially offensive remarks or conduct which might be construed as harassment in the U.S. is a good start. Moreover, they suggest additional training so that women can deal appropriately with comments and behaviors of host nationals aimed at testing their competence or authority. Taylor and Napier (1996) for example explain how one female manager was always introduced by her male law partner by mentioning the prestigious university she graduated from. This small measure, according to the authors, was sufficient to accord her the credibility needed in the eyes of her Japanese clients.

Another important recommendation suggested by Adler (1994) is that the sending organization set the tone that the female manager is in charge from the outset. This would include, but is not limited to: assigning an appropriate title to her from the beginning and reorientat-

ing host national questions, concerns and discussions directed at male colleagues to the female manager in charge when appropriate. As Caligiuri and Cascio note (1998) this is particularly important in dispelling the belief that the female managers are not just their as token, and do not in fact represent the most qualified candidates for the position.

This training should not be limited to pre-departure training, but should be broadened to include ongoing training and support to ease the female manager's cultural transition into the host culture. This kind of training and support is of particular importance in those cultures where the status of women is less than that of men.

This article has demonstrated that while host national attitudes toward foreign female managers are not always favorable, they do not necessarily represent an obstacle to her efficacy on the job. Nevertheless, further research is needed in order to examine the performance evaluation of female expatriate managers of themselves and by their actual host national colleagues in order to be able to generalize female expatriate manager efficacy. If possible, this research should build upon the studies of Sinangil and Ones to include other geographic regions and cultural contexts where the status of women in society might differ. Similarly, the current body of literature would benefit notably from an extension of these current findings to include studies which aim to evaluate a foreign female manager's efficacy from both the perspective of the manager herself and her colleagues in the same study.

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