

**Cross-Cultural Challenges and Adjustments of Expatriates: A Case Study in Malaysia**

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**Abstract**

Due to globalization and vision to be an industrialized nation, Malaysia acknowledges the inflow of expatriates into the country to meet the demands for skilled and professional manpower. This paper reports on a study conducted among a group of expatriates in Malaysia. The objectives of the study are to examine challenges faced by the expatriates and adjustments made to the challenges. Cultural clashes between foreign and local values are inevitable in which expatriates experience challenges. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 male and female expatriates working in various firms and institutions in Malaysia. The study highlighted the psychological, socio-cultural and work challenges. Adjustments were based on individual initiatives based on the psychological and mental strengths of the expatriates, combined with efforts of peer expatriates, parent firms and host organizations.

**Introduction**

Economic liberalization triggers many international organizations to expand their business along with establishing their reputation globally. In this regard, Bartol and Martin (1998) refer to globalization process a worldwide integration strategy where the purpose involves at developing relatively standardized products with global appeals, as well as rationalizing operations throughout the world. In achieving this objective, organizations require to send

their designate representatives for overseas assignments in order to maintain the standards of their products or services abroad.

Within the perspective of becoming an industrialized nation, Malaysia has progressively opened its market towards globalization and liberalization of trade and services. As a result, at present there are many international organizations expanding their businesses along with establishing their reputation in this country. As such the country acknowledges the inflow of expatriates into this country to meet the needs for skilled and professional manpower or human expertise in various fields. It is expected that the country still needs this foreign expertise for 10 to 20 years to come (Shephard, 1996). Hiring expatriates from abroad is one of the ways to expose the Malaysian workforce toward foreign expertise. It is reported that there were 21,859 approved expatriate postings in Malaysia in 1999 alone, as compared to 20,625 in the previous year (Malaysia, 1999; Malaysia, 2000).

Putting it from the perspective of expatriates' host country for instance, by 2008, as many as 1000 US companies will have relocated their entire corporate headquarters worldwide and to take advantage of tax incentives, access to raw materials, lower labor cost and better quality of life in new locations in the developing countries, one of which is Malaysia (Hutchings and Ratnasari, 2006). Therefore, there has been a continuous increase in foreign service admission in various sectors of employment in this country.

An 'expatriate' can be defined as an individual who is not a citizen of the country of which he or she is assigned to work in. Richardson and McKenna (2002) referred to expatriates as professionals who are living in an overseas country on a temporary basis, but normally for more than one year. In general, besides monitoring and controlling the financial distribution and profit gain of the company, an expatriate is expected to extend their knowledge and skills in technology transfer (Shephard, 1996). The expatriates are expected to offer new knowledge for the locals to adapt thus the latter has high respect towards the former at the workplace. The role of an expatriate is regarded as distinctively significant since the main task is to act upon maintaining the organizational structure and philosophy of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) while following the rules and regulations of work within

the host country. In the public sector, the expatriates mainly hold diplomatic posts in foreign embassies or as consultants for government agencies; while in the private sector, the expatriate managers are mostly positioned in MNCs that run business operations.

Living in a new cultural environment, expatriates are bound to face challenges and make adjustments in their lifestyles in order to make their assignment effective (Ward and Rana-Deuba, 2000; Zakaria, 2000). Thus, this study was conducted to answer two research questions: First, what are challenges faced by the expatriates during their stay in Malaysia with regard to the differences in culture? Second, how did the expatriates adjust to cross-cultural differences in the country?

Although there are empirical studies that have been done abroad with regard to the issues of expatriation, a limited amount has only been done according to Malaysian settings. Therefore, the result of this study is significant in order to add to the body of knowledge, specifically in the field of cross-cultural studies and international management among expatriates in the country. Furthermore, it is hoped to create awareness on issues of cross-cultural challenges and adjustments, not only to the expatriates, but also to Malaysians in general in order to build a more productive workforce in years to come.

## **Literature Review**

Expatriation in Malaysia is not a new phenomenon. The country has gone through three waves or phases of incoming expatriates. Initially, Britons represented the first group of expatriates that came to Malaysia. For the past 10 years or so, they are substantially located in the private sector where big organizations are concerned, such as Shell, ICI, Dunlop, Guthries, Harrison and Crosfield and British Petroleum. Nonetheless, in the government sector, the expatriates are mainly posted as advisors, diplomats, academics and technical specialists (Shephard, 1996). At a later stage, the second wave arrived. They were among those who came from United States of America and other European countries whom were assigned in large multinationals such as, Phillips, Siemens, Volvo, Nestle and Esso. Finally,

the third wave of expatriates came to Malaysia which were mainly represented by the Asian group of managers mainly from Japan, Taiwan and Korea along with some other European and American expatriates. This third wave resulted from the "Look East" policy by the Government in 1980s as well as due to closer relations with Australia and the Newly Industrialized Countries in Asia specifically, along with the high growth of electronics industry in Malaysia (Shephard, 1996).

Since living abroad offers a different lifestyle and set of experiences for the expatriates, facing challenges and making necessary adjustments are needed in order to survive working and living in a foreign country. The changes encountered during cross-cultural transitions may appear to be stressful. Adjustments consume time, effort and money. Moreover, it requires patience and interest of the expatriates to make the adjustments a success. There are expatriates who find that the challenges have an influence towards their decision to reconsider staying in the host country (Aycan, 1997). Literature on expatriation shows that individuals from different cultures may encounter difficulties in comprehending each other's values and behaviour towards another. Thus, this may lead to cultural clash (Elashmawi & Harris, 1993). Due to the "cultural baggage" that has been nurtured based on the individual's own cultural orientation and reward or punishment systems (Elashmawi, 2000), differences of beliefs in a multicultural setting becomes inevitable. Cultural clashes in the workplace can be referred to as an example of a major cross-cultural challenge for expatriates working abroad. According to Asma (1996), among the common challenges that foreigners commented during their stay in Malaysia, include the issues of the local public services, cleanliness, environmental awareness and restricted local media.

Another issue to be taken into consideration is gender in expatriation. According to Caliguiri and Cascio (1998), besides understanding the cultural differences, women should be aware of the differences in gender as well. In male-dominated society women expatriates may face cultural differences, which could affect their performance in international assignments. In order for these expatriates to overcome the challenges they encounter, Fish and Wood (1996) stated that understanding the differences in cross-cultural settings and applying it within the

role of an expatriate and the organizational structure, may assist in better adjustments for the expatriates and gain better acceptance by the local employees. With reference to a study done by Tung (1998) towards 409 expatriates on assignments to 51 countries around the world, majority of the expatriates took six to twelve months to feel comfortable living in a new cultural setting. Aycan (1997) emphasized that there are three aspects of adjustments, namely psychological, socio-cultural and work adjustments. An alternative to which these expatriates can prepare themselves with these adjustments is through cross-culture training (CCT). Caliguiri (2000) add that the goal of CCT is to minimize “cultural shock” when on foreign deployment and enhance the managers’ cross cultural experience. In terms of behavior, the ultimate objective is to improve the functional skills of managers on overseas’ assignments. CCT is important in order to improve functional skills and to minimize cultural shock among expatriates during their international assignments. Richardson and McKenna (2002) further confirm that support in the form of CCT is important for overseas appointment otherwise the expatriate managers would repatriate prematurely.

This study is based on cross-cultural management theory by Bartol and Martin (1998). It is a process in which the management takes into account cultural differences and ability to adapt to the different cultures. Culture of a society helps to develop the mentality of the people in the society. Culture guides the mind and influences the ways people perceive matters, act politically, make and prioritize decisions, manage their lives and basically on ways they think. One should not separate self-awareness and cultural awareness. One has to go beyond the meaning of culture itself in order to have a better awareness of how culture influences our personal lives.

In the field of international management, there are four types of orientations, which organizations choose to apply. The managers of MNCs tend to subscribe to one of these management orientations toward applying the methods of operations in their organizations (Bartol & Martin, 1998). The orientations are as follows:

- Ethnocentric orientation: This can be referred to the “home-country oriented”, whereby executives hold the assumptions that practices that work in the headquarters or home country must necessarily work elsewhere.
- Polycentric orientation: This is an orientation where it is “host-country oriented” which executives believe that the parts of the organization located in a given host country should be staffed by local individuals to the fullest extent possible.
- Regiocentric orientation: A “region oriented” method of international management approach, whereby executives believe that geographic regions have commonalities that make a regional focus advantageous and that company problems related to that region are generally best solved by individuals from the region.
- Geocentric orientation: This orientation involves a “world-oriented” management where the executives applies the belief that a global view is needed in both the headquarters of the parent company and its various subsidiaries and that the best individuals, either from host- or home-country, should be utilized in overcoming any problems faced by the company in any parts of the world.

By identifying the type of orientation practiced by an organization, it will assist this study in finding the level of responsibilities and specific roles that an expatriate plays in an organization.

## **Methodology**

This study applied a phenomenological qualitative study due to the fact that it attempts to explore the experiences in terms of challenges and adjustments of expatriates in the context of cross-cultural setting. According to Merriam (1998) the focus of phenomenological study is upon the “essence or structure of an experience (phenomenon) (p. 15). Thus, it will require the researcher to interpret the experiences that the informants encounter. However, personal biases or beliefs should be put aside while doing this type of research, so that it will not

interfere with the seeing the structure of the phenomenon. Berg (1998) further supports that qualitative study enables a researcher to share in the understandings and perceptions of other individuals and to explore how they structure and give meaning to their daily lives. It requires the researcher to interpret the experiences, which the informants encounter.

### **Research Participants and Location**

The participants of the research are men and women expatriates currently staying and working in the areas of Selangor and Klang Valley for at least six months. They are professionals working in higher education institutions and MNCs. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling, whereby it “is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore select a sample from which most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61).

The informants’ first selection criterion required men and women expatriates who are currently working in Malaysia. Secondly, they are attached to any government or private agencies, companies in the Klang Valley area and have possibly served in this country for more than six months. Through the interviews made, most of the informants were able to respond to numerous experiences within the first six months of their stay. The longer duration of stay may assist in giving more meaningful perceptions with regard to their personal experience on challenges and adjustments.

Thirdly, each informant was expected to have some knowledge of management, well-exposed to interactions among the locals either at their workplace or otherwise. Moreover, the expatriate must be a professional in any of these areas, namely, business, academic, medicine, communications or engineering, since these were mainly the common areas where skills and knowledge of the expatriates are most needed in this country. Their names and addresses were obtained through personal contacts of the researcher and the use of the ‘snowballing technique’. The number of participants was determined until the study reached its saturation point. The profile of the participants is as in Table 1.

**Table 1: Profile of Participants**

<b>Informants</b>	<b>Occupation (Nature of Organization affiliated with)</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Duration of stay</b>
Gary	Managing Director (Hotel)	New Zealand	3 years and 6 months
John	Regional Sales Manager (MNC)	United Kingdom	2 years and 6 months
Ahmed	Engineer (MNC)	South Africa	6 months
Govinder	Assistant Manager (Consumer Product Manufacturing Company)	India	2 years and 6 months
Madeline	Lecturer ( Institution of Higher Education)	France	7 years and 6 months
Betty	Lecturer ( Institution of Higher Education)	United Kingdom	11 years
Mayumi	Lecturer ( Institution of Higher Education)	Japan	5 years
Jacque	Regional Manager (Training Institution)	France	10 months
Eva	Lecturer ( Institution of Higher Education)	German	3 years
Robert	Lecturer ( Institution of Higher Education)	USA	5 years
Andrew	Engineer (MNC)	United Kingdom	1 year
Charles	Engineer (MNC)	Australia	10 months
Hanz	Manager (MNC)	Netherlands	7 years
Darren	Senior Vice President (MNC)	United Kingdom	1 year
Yushiro	Advisor (High-tech Industry)	Japan	8 years
Frank	Engineer (High-tech Industry)	United Kingdom	3 years

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were gathered involving face-to-face in-depth interviews with participants in which appointments were set before the meeting. The interviews were conducted on an individual basis, using a semi-structured set of questions. The questions generally focused on their perceptions about working in this country, the challenges encountered and adjustments made either in work or non-work domains. The interviews were facilitated using a voice recorder. The data from the tapes were transcribed and further analyzed through coding and categorizing until a set of themes derived. Interpretations related to cross-cultural challenges and adjustments were made based on the emerged themes. In order to maintain and strengthen



the validity and reliability of this study, the researcher applied process of triangulation in which other techniques such as, member checks, audit trail, and peer consultation were incorporated.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Cross-Cultural Challenges**

Based on the data analysis, this section presents challenges faced by expatriates working in Malaysia. The challenges were categorized into six and three of which produce two sub-categories of challenges. They are as follows:

#### **1. Attitude of Malaysians**

##### ***Difficulty in understanding the indirect and non-confrontational behavior of Malaysians***

Almost all of the expatriates interviewed mentioned that Malaysians were known to be indirect and non-confrontational in terms of expressing their personal opinions towards others. The following response of Betty indicates:

Malaysians do not really want to say anything that might hurt the people. Whatever they say they do not want to look like criticizing...If they see someone in the senior rank say something...then the rest of the junior people will not say anything...

As for Madeline, she made her own assumption on the reason why Malaysians acted as such. She said, "But I know that it is not only in Malaysia, it's more in the Asian culture, we are not supposed to have confrontation. Because confrontation is seen as losing your face and people take it negatively"...

Asma (1992) mentioned that indirect and non-confrontational behavior of Malaysians is also related to values of respect for seniors or elders, and avoiding embarrassment to others by the act of "saving face". Being an Asian community, Malaysians tend to avoid conflict when interacting with others, since most of us were brought up that way. Thus, to Malaysians,

it is better to dismiss confronting over unpleasant issues. Due to this, the expatriates found it difficult to have direct confrontation or any discussion with the locals especially when a problem arose and a solution was required since most of the time the reaction from the locals would either be positive or impartial towards the issue at hand. This type of behavior is consistent with Hofstede's dimension of uncertainty avoidance, whereby members of the society feel uncomfortable expressing their views in situations, which are unstructured, unclear and unpredictable.

### ***Malaysians' misconception towards 'Mat Salleh'***

Malaysians define "Mat Salleh" as a local name given to foreigners who are Caucasian or in other words, the "white" people. The expatriates had the opinion that Malaysians had preconceived ideas about the "Mat Salleh" term and thus, this created a number of misconceptions towards them. This became a challenge for some of the informants, for they have to prove themselves the opposite. The response below explains this issue:

One negative thing about the way of thinking that I don't like is that many people think that people from the West have lost their values. Like based on the movies, American movies...Doesn't mean that all the people are like that. Even though we have lost a bit on the religion yes, but I don't think the moral values have been lost...just because they have seen a few things and hear a few things...they just making it a general case... (Madeline)

An interesting fact was pointed out by John, when he mentioned that he disagreed with the fact that Malaysians normally generalized all "Mat Salleh" as having the same attitudes. However, despite the fact he is a Westerner, he found himself having more common grounds with the Asians rather than the Western people. His statement was as such;

...I don't know what the concept of Malaysians are with the Western people... but some people just think..."Mat Salleh" they are all the same. But you see...we're

not. There are English, Scots, American, German, French, Swedish...totally different cultures. Many people think British and the Americans are the same...totally different people...diverse. To me (a British expatriate) personally, I have more in common with the Asian than I do with the Americans...

As Elashmawi (2000) mentioned, expatriates tend to bring along their “culture baggage” and when cultural clashes occur, misunderstandings and misconception may result out of it. However, with regard to the misconception of “Mat Salleh”, it was probably due to the lack of exposure among Malaysians towards other parts of the world. Thus, generalizations were easily made towards foreigners. The last theme, Malaysian’s misconception towards “Mat Salleh”, was a challenge that represents an example of cultural clashes whereby apparently the Malaysians' cultural background differs from those of the expatriates.

## **2. Custom and Religion**

### ***Difficulty in understanding the dress code of the locals***

Since Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country enriched with multi-cultural customs, expatriates find living in Malaysia as an interesting experience and full of diversity. However, among many Malaysian customs which were practiced, there are those that brought challenges to these expatriate. One of which that posed as a challenge, was the idea of understanding the dress code of Malaysians especially for female expatriates at the workplace. As mentioned by some of the informants, if they do not dress themselves in accordance to the social norms, negative remarks from the locals were bound to be heard, although it may not be directly voiced. Madeline stated her opinion by saying that,

...in terms of clothing, I didn't know how it is. And also I remembered in the beginning, coming sleeveless and all...now I hear the comments about other people who come sleeveless, I said to myself, "Oh my goodness, what kind of stories have been going on about me?" ...but nobody ever told be about anything...until my

own husband came and told me that perhaps I should not be dressing like that...but nobody else would do that...

Eva had also voiced out her views by mentioning for the fact that since she is a “white female”, the local people tend to regard her dressing as improper. She was quoted to say that,

...if you are a Malay women, a Chinese women, an Indian... you can do actually what you want and nobody cares because you're a local. But if you are a white, everything is different...starting if I have to dress myself as a Chinese woman I would have problems. If I'm a Chinese woman, nobody cares, if I'm white yes, they care, they care...because I'm white it is much stricter, it is much tougher.

### ***Being cautious over religious issues***

The majority of Malaysians are Malay Muslims and due to this, Islamic religious restrictions become a part of the practices and norms of Malaysians. Being aware of this issue, the expatriates found themselves being cautious over actions made towards the local Malays either at the workplace or non workplace. Clarifications need to be made in order to have an understanding over religious matters to avoid any misconduct in the future. The statement below illustrates an experience of Yushiro, who learned the hard way about religious practices in Malaysia. He stated that,

When I came here, it is a big difference. In Japan the Japanese in general, are free to act in whichever way you wish to. But in Malaysia it seems that Malaysian (Muslims) are being controlled because of their faith in religion. The culture is different....If in one room, no one is in the room except you and me alone, and we talk about work. In Malaysia, it is not permitted...Last time, I didn't know, so one of my friends told me it is dangerous to do that. Now I understand. I give you an

example like today, all men go out for Friday prayer, I'm the only man here and if a lady comes in my office, I just say that we cannot talk...

At times clarifications over conflicting religious issue not only required and limited to the expatriates themselves but also ought to be extended to their family members who are living together in Malaysia. For instance, Betty, who has two children who went to normal public schools, pointed out that:

...there is also a conflict within the school environment of my children...during fasting month, my daughter was told not to sit next to a Muslim girl, because this girl was fasting and that she was clean and pure while my daughter has eaten and that wasn't clean...Things like that I find difficult to understand...

These two challenges also came about as a result of differences beliefs and practices as mentioned in the last three types of challenges in the first category. As Elashmawi (1993) stated, when an individual experiences difficulties to understand the effect of his or her own cultural values towards his or her behavior, that individual will have problem of understanding another person's behavior. Thus, as a result cultural clashes happen, where particularly in this category it involves the misunderstanding of the dress code and religious practices of Muslims in Malaysia.

### **3. Addressing Social Status: Difficulty in addressing names of Malaysians according to social status**

Almost all informants interviewed agreed that social formalities were extremely important in the daily social interaction of the locals. This is different from the foreign culture in which informality and direct way of interaction are the norms. Such differences pose challenges to the expatriates since they are required to acknowledge with whom they are talking or addressing to in terms of the person's title (i.e. Tan Sri, Dato' and Professor). Social

formalities may also act as a gap or a barrier in communication, and in some instances making the social interaction uncomfortable. As Jacque revealed in his statement,

*People here are so conscious about your title, such as Dr, Professor, Ms or Mrs, In the West, we could always talk to others such as, "Hi John" or "Hi Robert" even though they are professors or one with Ph.D...*

On the other hand, Robert added that since he is a foreigner, his students were more comfortable calling him "Sir" instead of his own name. He was quoted saying that, "the people here called me "Sir". This might be due to the influence of the British...At first, I felt by calling me "Sir" there is some kind of social distance between us..."

This category is related to the values of respect for elders and hierarchical relationships, which make Malaysians very receptive without much questioning (Asma, 1996). On the other hand, among the westerners especially Americans, informal address indicates the value of equality. As such egalitarianism among them could encourage openness and break communication barriers. Another concept which is consistent to this challenge is the concept of power distances by Hofstede (1980) whereby, the higher the hierarchy, the greater the power distance. Thus; in Malaysia, being a lecturer and foreigner pose a prevalent barrier between the expatriate and his students.

#### **4. Gender Issues in Expatriation: Preconceived ideas about western women expatriates**

When a Westerner comes into an eastern society, one of the manifestations of the difference is the preconceived knowledge about a Westerner, especially with regard to women. This knowledge is generated through many ways; the most common is through the mass media. Instances on how western women are portrayed were represented by the experiences shared from the interviews. For instance, Madeline and Eva described:

...I have experienced negative things. Some people tend to think that when a white person, a girl and alone, they are an easy person and they are trying to do certain

things with you...that doesn't mean all Malaysian men behaving in such way...Since I shouldn't say Malaysians are like that, so they [Malaysians] shouldn't say Europeans are like that too!...

...because I'm a woman...because I'm white...during the time that my husband was not around... I couldn't go out at night just to..."kedai kopi", to take dinner whatever...because there are always men...disturbing me, try to tackle me...very difficult...much tougher so, my outgoing life maybe half of that if I am together with my husband...I think people here in their mind equate what they see in American movie. That's how they behave towards me. They don't understand that American woman is not the same as European woman...

The preconceived ideas posed as a challenge to the women expatriates when dealing with the opposite sex. According to the responses given by the informants, with reference to Hofstede's (1980) dimension of masculinity-femininity, Malaysia has the characteristic of a slightly high-level of masculinity. Although opportunities are given to women to work as expatriates in Malaysia, the opportunity is still limited based on the difficulty to gather many women expatriates in the corporate field.

## **5. Malaysian Working Habit**

### ***Difficulty in complying with the working pace***

Most of the informants interviewed came from highly industrialized nations whereby the people are used to living in the fast lane and having more established and efficient services for the public. Since their previous working trend differs from the working style that they are currently experiencing in Malaysia, it posed as a challenge for most of these expatriates here. From what the researcher gathered, among the challenges include slow-paced working speed and inefficient services offered. To illustrate this, Hanz voiced out his view by saying that,

The speed of doing work is different...in Netherlands, people are more stressful and everybody is time conscious. Here people take their own time...People sort of starting late and leaving early for lunch...And you know, at the end of the day, you just try to accept this as long as the job is done...I am not in a position for their time keeping. The manager should be responsible.

Jacque also pointed out this issue based from his experience holding the responsibility as the regional manager in the company,

...the way we (European) work is quite different. We have to...work with precise objectives and targets. The pressure is very high in Europe. We cannot have this pressure here because people are not used to the type of pressure. Too strong pressure, it is not very easy to handle. I do have this problem...with the staff...I cannot put the pressure all the time. By my bosses in France have to be explained about the constraints we have here. The people here are not quite the same as the people in Europe...And t the same time we have targets to achieve,...and I am in the middle of two different cultures...

In addition, John, who had experienced dealing business with Malaysians perceived that, "...when you do business with them (Malaysian), there is no sense of urgency. And in this industry, you have to have the sense of urgency...the pace is quicker. And it's the same if you go to the Immigration,...the tax office...they'll do it in their own time".

### ***High level of bureaucracy hinders job implementation***

According to a number of informants interviewed, the level of bureaucracy in this country is high. Mainly, the people at the high management level of their hierarchical positions acquire strong control over issues at the workplace. Therefore, at certain instances it affects the flow of work among the locals and the expatriates. Decision making processes and the duration of task completion may take longer than expected. This was a challenge that expatriates encountered, which required some skills of cross-cultural negotiations to adjust and to



overcome any related problems arise. Being in this situation, one of the informants, Ahmed mentioned,

"The company here is very much bureaucratic. They still have a problem with letting go off accountability...There are things which still needs to be referred to so many people higher up. You are given a job, but you are not at liberty to act on the job freely...within their own positions...".

Being a leader in a certain project that is assigned to an expatriate, problem arise when the Malaysian subordinates do not complete their task in time due to orders given by the higher management team to complete another new task without consulting the expatriate before hand. When asked how Frank felt, he responded;

...I rather would like to hear them (local subordinates) say exactly when it can be done and do not leave anything hanging and not knowing when it can be done...it is possible that they had to go to somebody else to get permission to do it...they did not tell me...in accordance to the hierarchical of responsibilities...the superiors told them to complete a certain job first...

Generally, based on the findings of the study, the locals' working habits seemed to collide with the expatriates' working habits. Since most of the expatriates were come from well-developed nations, their working pace is faster and planning becomes more efficient. Thus, working in Malaysia presents a slower pace and less efficient as perceived by these informants. According to Asma (1992; 1996) there is an obvious difference in perception of time by Malaysian and the expatriates. The former tends to do their work at their own time and more relaxed. Malaysia is regarded as a polychronic society where they perceive time as less tangible and thus, several things can happen at one time. Due to this Malaysians concentrated more on relationship building rather than the task given. Giacalone and Beard (1994) also mentioned the concept of "impression management" whereby an expatriate gives an impression which can easily be misunderstood by others. In the case of the working style

of Malaysians, perhaps the Malaysians could not understand the sense of urgency in completing their tasks due to the impression that the expatriates give to the locals that it is permissible for them to do their assignments at their own normal pace. Confrontations are needed from both parties in order to lessen the conflict.

## **6. Cross-cultural Training: Unavailability of a Structured Cross-Cultural Training program**

Another challenge is the unavailability of a structured introductory training program to the expatriates with regard to the culture in Malaysia. Most of them did not experience any cross cultural training program, but only two of the informants interviewed, went through a short debriefing session. However it was mainly about their job specifications rather than their culture-oriented. According to Govinder,

...I came here...the company does not have a structured orientation program for me, what am I supposed to be doing in the next few months...I realized that it was almost like being thrown here...it would really help if I had a structured orientation....

However, another informant, Ahmed went through a short debriefing. Nonetheless, he found it impractical. He mentioned that,

...it wasn't a course at all...I was given probably a half an hour debrief from the company in South Africa (country of origin). It was very superficial in the sense that they told you most of the things I already knew, like the company's culture...

explained that, personally he found it essential for expatriates, whom he found most of them unknowledgeable, to go through a cross-cultural awareness program in order to be well-adjusted in a new culture. His response was as follows,

No, I did not go through any formal training at all. I think that is the norm...most of the expatriates I know...don't seem to be overly knowledgeable on Malaysian customs you know...and yeah...I think it would be useful to have an exposure towards the Malaysian customs...

The findings revealed that there is a need for a structured cross-cultural (CCT) training program, since the expatriates will find it useful in understanding the cultural aspects of Malaysia. At present there has not been a structured CCT program being applied for expatriates in Malaysia. The aim of CCT is to improve functional skills and to minimize "culture shock" for the expatriates during international assignments (Harrison, 1992). The significance of CCT has also been stressed by Hutchings (2003) among Australian expatriates in China on top of having prior knowledge about the country. CCT is also important as it facilitates process of acculturation and develops culture-specific as well as culture-general skills needed to increase sociocultural and psychological adjustments of expatriates (Zakaria, 2000). CCT was conducted at pre-departure and post-arrival stage of the expatriation. Women expatriates will need a different set of CCT program since their challenges differ slightly as compared to men expatriates, as quoted earlier in the findings. The women expatriates, for instance, will need to be given more exposure and understanding towards the proper dress code and on how to interact with local men without giving them the wrong signals.

### **Cross-Cultural Adjustments**

The differences between cultures made it inevitable to avoid those cross-cultural challenges. Therefore in order to adapt with the current living conditions, several adjustments need to be made. The duration and success of acculturation process, depends on the ability of the individual to adapt in the new culture. Cross-cultural adjustments for these informants were categorized as follows:

## **1. Cultural Knowledge Regarding Malaysia**

### ***Acquiring the cultural knowledge about Malaysia through friends***

Friends who were familiar with this country could be a good source in gathering information about the country. As mentioned by John, "...yeah, I was able to get in touch with a friend of mine who had lived here (Malaysia) for 2 years before and he said it' s great...somehow he had told me of what to expect..."

### ***Acquiring the cultural knowledge about Malaysia through self-read books and media***

Besides through friends, other sources can also be of help. According to Ahmed,

...the company I worked for gave me brochures about Malaysia around 50 pages...it was something like "Expatriates' Guide to Malaysia" or something...I can't remember...I've gathered as much information from the Internet as I could to learn about the place and people...I bought a book...so, all the basic things we knew before we came...yes, it does help a lot!

Acquiring information about Malaysia prior to and after arrival to this country helps to create expectations about Malaysia in general. It will lessen the cultural shock and at the same time will give a better understanding on locals' behavior when interaction takes place between expatriates and the locals. At present, there are various sources which expatriates are able to access information about Malaysia. It only takes some effort to do so, as illustrated in the findings. According to Tung (1998), it is required for expatriates to be attracted to and knowledgeable about the host country in order to adapt one self in a new culture. This is the form of anticipatory adjustment as mentioned by Black *et al.* (1999), whereby it includes having an accurate expectation about the country.

## **2. Previous Experiences in Other Countries: Using the knowledge of previous experiences of foreign assignments**

More than half of the informants had experience in other developing Asian countries. They have encountered cultural differences in terms of religion, language, and mode of livelihood in other societies. These experiences to a certain extent have facilitated their adjustments in Malaysia. As Gary and John stated from their own experience

...my past experiences in Indonesia and other Asian countries keeps my perspective differently in terms of adjustment here, I think if you go to some of the areas that are not as developed as Kuala Lumpur,...when you come to Kuala Lumpur, you think "Aa...this is pretty good"...

...yeah, my working experiences in other countries do help in adjusting myself here...I've traveled the world before I came here. I've worked in Angola, and all around Europe...I've been working in Thailand...so I was pretty much grounded before I came here...

Jacque supported by mentioning that, "...I'm used to cultural environment in terms of Islam because I was assigned before in the Middle East. Of course, there are slight differences...but I don't think it would effect the way I should adjust myself here...". Thus, for Jacque, since a majority of Malaysians are Muslims, he found himself easily adjusted in that aspect. Frank also pointed out his experience. He stated that "...

I was not informed about the culture before I was in Thailand before and I suspected that it would be something like Thailand...Like in Korea before, I was in a very stressful condition...I find it easier to slip into the culture here...and there was no culture shock..."

Since it has shown in the findings that previous experiences of expatriates in other countries had lead them to a better adjustment process. It may due to the exposure of various cultures

and challenges in those countries before having to stay in Malaysia. Bell and Harrison (1996) relate this method to “contact theory” which suggested that interpersonal interaction among people from various cultures may lead to understanding and adjustment because this acknowledges the expatriate to behave in a given situation.

### **3. Tolerance and Optimism: Becoming more tolerant and optimistic about the locals and environment**

Expatriates tend to be more tolerant and optimistic in their attitudes towards cultural differences that occur in a cross-cultural environment. Generally, they learned to be more acceptable to the lifestyle they discovered in Malaysia and moreover, towards the Malaysian culture. Madeline made a point that,

...just that I'm here I have to make efforts, it's more telling myself I want to be happy here...I just had to make the best out of it...after you don't think about it . It's not conscious. At the beginning yes, it was a conscious effort. And once you have the idea to adjust and trying to understand than it's OK...

Charles on the other hand, had always reminded himself and his wife to be tolerant and optimistic. He said that,

My wife myself always tell ourselves...if you are in a foreign country, if things are not up to our expectations, we have to adapt with the local condition as soon as you can. We do not want to make ourselves unhappy and miserable...and will not enjoy our stay...

From the perspectives of working environment, it was also essential to keep a positive outlook over challenging matters, since this served as a way to become adaptable with the new culture According to Hanz, “...any foreigners should have the level of tolerance in the

country they go, if they don't have the tolerance, they will not be able to work with the locals..." . John and Yushiro had also shared similar views respectively as reported below:

...If you want to do business, that's the way it is. It's no good getting upset about it and it's certainly no good shouting at anybody. It's the one thing I have learned since I've been here. Once you have upset someone then, that's it...very difficult to do business them again or gain respect...If you want to live in someone else's country...for any length of time, then you have to adapt to their culture and to their people otherwise, why be here?...you can't expect an Eastern culture to be the same as you...

...If you don't accept the culture, you will not be able to proceed in doing your job here. Example, during a very busy schedule, I asked my subordinate to do job, and suddenly he replied, "No, I'm sorry I cannot do...must pray". So, OK...I have no complaints. If I complain, later other people will be angry at me...

The positive outlook over challenges faced by the expatriates by being tolerant and optimistic could assist in the adjustment mentioned in Aycan (1997), whereby maintaining good mental health and psychological well-being with a feeling of satisfaction. Many studies have indicated that expatriates who are flexible in their attitudes towards cultural differences are willing to learn from different cultural context and adjust better to overseas assignments (Calguiri and Cascio, 1998).

#### **4. Establishment of Support System**

##### ***Establishing support system from spouse and friends***

Most of the expatriates had the benefit to acquire support from spouses and friends around them. Many studies (Hutchings and Ratnasari, 2006; Hutchings, 2003; Richardson and

McKenna, 2002) confirmed that the family plays a key role in expatriation career. A strong support helps to build the character of the participants to survive in a new cultural environment. According to Betty, "...I talk to my husband about any difficulties I had...I do talk to my peers at work...I have a very good friend of mine who is married to a Malaysian...There are also others who give me a lot of support...". Eva also added that, "I have a couple of female colleagues whom I always talk to...we have our community but we don't meet that often...".

### ***Establishing support system from own organization***

Some organizations that employed expatriates took the responsibility in managing the well-being of their expatriate employees from the moment they arrive until the end of their contracts. Frank gave his views and said that, "When we first arrived here, we were allowed to stay in a house for a while which was provided by the company...and we were given a car. I would expect the parent company to help me if I have any problems...". Studies on the success of expatriates in international assignments showed that social support was one of the contributing factors other than the personal characteristics such as attitudes and self-orientation (Calquiri and Cascio, 1998; Foster, 2000). This also supported the study, which proved that organizational support from the parent company is positively related to general adjustments (Kraimer *et al.*, 2001; Hutchings and Ratnasari, 2006). Therefore the support from peers, spouse and the organization, which the expatriates work in, had shown to offer positive results towards their adjustments.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This study helps to give a better insight into the condition of expatriates' well-being in Malaysia. It brings an additional knowledge and the meaning of experiences in terms of the challenges and adjustment among men and women expatriates in this country. The study



offers evidence that challenges are inevitable to these expatriates due to differences in cultural background and understanding. Moreover, most of them come from industrialized western nations where distinctive work and social cultures are prevalently different from the eastern culture. Basically, due to different upbringing and cultural background, there are bound to be inconsistencies in terms of cultural understandings between the two cultures. Thus, it becomes the responsibility of parties involved namely, the expatriate and the host nation to be more aware and receptive towards the differences. The awareness could be created through various efforts in order to lessen the challenges with regard to the attitude of Malaysians, custom and religion, addressing social status, gender issues, Malaysian working habit and cross-cultural training. There is a need to develop a structured cross-cultural training (CCT) program in the future for the use of expatriates and their families coming to Malaysia. The components of this training program may be derived from the cross-cultural challenges and adjustments resulted from this study. A structured cross-cultural training program proves to be helpful as one of the strategic preparations to overcome the challenges (Caligiuri, 2000; Forster, 2000) and to contribute toward better adjustments in the host country.

**The study poses recommendations as follows:**

- i. There should be a strong cross-cultural training program in every organization that employs expatriates as among their employees. The training programs should not only be restricted to organizational culture in the company but also about Malaysian culture in general. The training program should be handled and facilitated by both, Malaysians and home-country representatives.
- ii. Intellectual discourse or talks and more research should be done in order to have a better understanding of the cultural differences among expatriates and the locals.
- iii. Malaysians should also be aware of the cultural differences that exist among various nationalities in this country. This could help to avoid or lessen

misunderstandings or miscommunication during interactions between Malaysians and foreigners.

For future studies, it is suggested that comparative studies should be made on Western expatriates and Asian expatriates to identify pattern of adjustment while staying and working in Malaysia. In addition, the challenges and adjustments experienced specifically by the spouses and children of these expatriates as well as factors affecting expatriates' performance may also be areas of interest for future research.

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