

Non-Traditional Expatriate Assignments in the Asia-Pacific: Characteristics & Challenges

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Abstract Despite reported increases in the number of non-traditional international assignments and assertions that it is an alternate way of undertaking international assignments, few researchers have conducted empirical studies of the phenomenon. Further, the success or failure of non-traditional expatriates can be as significant as that of traditional expatriates. Although their failure may not be as costly that for traditional expatriates, unsuccessful non-traditional expatriates can be rather expensive and the cumulative cost of their failure could become as high as the cost of traditional expatriate failure. In addition, the detrimental effects in terms of costs, diminished expatriates' morale, and missed business opportunities, could cause considerable damage to their organisations. As such, understanding the new expatriate assignments, particularly the reasons for undertaking the assignments, is crucial. This paper discusses the reasons for using non-traditional expatriate assignments and associated knowledge transfer from a sample of such managerial employees. This study used a convergent interview technique to obtain authentic responses.

Keywords Non-traditional expatriates, International assignments, Short-term expatriates, International staffing

1. Introduction

The rapid pace of internationalisation and competition among international organisations has led to growing emphasis on expatriate assignments across the world. One of the consequences of the global economic growth has been an increase in expatriate assignments (KPMG, 2010). It is claimed that expatriates are important in organisations and the costs associated with sending them overseas are very high (Fenwick, 2004). KPMG reports that 80 percent of 1000 organisations studied have recently undertaken overseas assignments for shorter periods, due to the failure of long-term assignments (Petrovic, Harris, & Brewster, 2000). Tahvanainen, Welch and Welch (2005) suggest that short-term expatriate assignments are an effective alternative to more traditional approaches.

Many different types of short-term assignment are introduced in the literature such as 'short-term' (Bharadwaj, 2000), 'non-standard' and 'international commuter' (Minbaeva & Michailova, 2004; Tahvanainen et al., 2005), 'flexpatriate' (Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007; Mayerhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl, & Kollinger, 2004), 'international business traveller' (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, & Herbert, 2004; McKenna & Richardson, 2007)

or 'frequent flyer' (Welch, Welch, & Worm, 2007) 2007), and 'boundary spanner' (Collings et al., 2007) These terms have a range of definitions which have raised questions about the purposes of short-term assignments and the issues surrounding them, notably knowledge transfer. To date, few studies have been undertaken on these issues, some of which were not empirical studies but merely collections of literature.

The findings gathered from interviews in this study indicate that organisations usually do not have specific terms for expatriates who undertake temporary international assignments. It appears that, to date there is no universal term for the short term expatriates. In fact, one research study found that 32 percent of its respondents did not record the number of their personnel who had undertaken short-term assignments (Petrovic et al., 2000). Although there was no rationale given in the study, it can be assumed that the reason is possibly due to the informal procedures used for selecting short-term expatriates (Tahvanainen et al., 2005). A rigorous literature review reveals that time is the key factor distinguishing short-term from long-term assignments. Therefore, the duration of an assignment can be used as the key factor to define the assignments. Using duration as a decisive factor, most of the non-traditional assignments such as short-term, international assignments, and international business travellers have one thing in common: they are undertaken in less than one year. The purposes of the assignments are described as troubleshooting, controlling, and management development, and they involve durations of

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1 to 12 months, unaccompanied by family, and the selection procedures are mostly informal - minimal bureaucracy or training (Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005). To differentiate short-term and long-term assignments, this paper uses the term 'traditional assignment' to refer to long-term assignments that are undertaken for more than one year, and the term 'non-traditional assignment' to describe assignments that are undertaken in less than one year.

2. Problem Statement

Non-traditional assignments are reported to have emerged in the late 1980s and 2000s (Dowling & Welch, 1988; Petrovic *et al.*, 2000). A number of studies show that companies have been utilising these new ways of doing international business (Harris, 2002; Mayerhofer, Hartmann, & Herbert, 2004). Therefore, understanding the reasons for using these types of assignments is crucial. Further, the success or failure of non-traditional expatriate assignments can be as significant as for traditional assignments. Although non-traditional expatriate assignments may not be as costly as traditional assignments, the cumulative costs of their failure could be similar to the costs of traditional assignments. Additionally, the detrimental effects, diminished employee morale, and missed business opportunities could add overall damage to organisations.

Evidence shows that one of the roles of expatriates is as knowledge transferror (Bonache, Brewster, & Suutari, 2007; Bonache & Zarraga-Oberty, 2008; Harzing, 2001b; Riusala & Suutari, 2004), and the knowledge being transferred is varied, including management, marketing, technology, company policy and know-how, and corporate image (Bonache & Zarraga-Oberty, 2008; Hocking, Brown, & Harzing, 2007; Mayerhofer, Hartmann, & Herbert, 2004; Minbaeva & Michailova, 2004; Riusala & Suutari, 2004), however, a study by Harzing (2001b) shows that only technical knowledge is being transferred. This is clearly not comprehensive. Thus, there is an urgent need to study the knowledge transfer characteristics.

Next, a different perspective of knowledge presented by Hocking, Brown and Harzing (2007) shows that knowledge is a generic intent of all strategic expatriate assignments and that only the type of knowledge involved and its means of transfer vary from one assignment purpose to another. Therefore, the clarification of the type of knowledge transferred is significant to depict not just the assignments but also the ways it is being conveyed.

There is also a need to identify the knowledge transfer direction since the current literature explains that the direction of knowledge being transferred was merely between headquarters and subsidiaries (Harzing, 2001b). Measurement used by Mudambi & Navarra (2004) was taken to identify the directions involved. There are four

direction identified in knowledge transfer process. The first direction involves providing knowledge and skills to the subsidiary. The second direction involves providing knowledge and skills to the parent corporation. The third direction involves receiving knowledge and skills from the parent corporation. The fourth direction involves receiving knowledge and skills from the subsidiary (Mudambi & Navarra, 2004). Previous studies merely studied the direction between headquarters and subsidiaries.

3. Purpose of Study

This paper reports the reasons for using non-traditional expatriate assignments from the perspective of those engaged in the phenomenon. The differences between the reasons for using traditional and non-traditional assignments could aid the choice between the uses of those assignments. It may also assist in the development of a more comprehensive instrument to measure non-traditional expatriate performance.

The aims of this study are, firstly, to identify the reasons for using non-traditional assignments by gathering and analysing the perspectives of those who are engaged; and secondly, to investigate the relationships between the perceived importance of their assignments with their backgrounds. Thirdly, discussing the differences between the use of traditional and non-traditional assignments, and fourthly, suggesting the selection criteria to select non-traditional expatriates. Finally, to identify knowledge characteristics and the directions involved in transferring the knowledge.

4. Methodology

A series of face-to-face interviews with non-traditional expatriates was conducted to obtain a broad overview of issues followed by an online survey. The interviewees were chosen on the following criteria: 1) an international manager who has undertaken non-traditional assignments, or 2) an international manager who has knowledge about the assignments or has been engaged in allocating and managing non-traditional expatriates. Twenty-three international managers were identified and selected as interviewees. The managerial levels of the interviewees were obtained from their organisational charts which were available online or in their offices. There was an open ended-question in the questionnaire that aimed to obtain information about the reasons for using non-traditional assignments. Convergent and thematic analyses were conducted in the effort to obtain data. Likert scales of 1 to 5 were used to obtain respondents' perceived of their assignment importance. The assignment criteria used in questionnaire were generated from the literature and interview sessions conducted in this study.

5. Research Findings

Survey respondents

Table 1. Profiles of the Survey Respondents

Characteristic	Respondent	Characteristic	Respondent
Gender		Age	
Female	21 (34.4%)	Less than 30	15 (24.5%)
Male	38 (62.2%)	30-39	10 (16.3%)
No response	2 (3.4%)	40-49	15 (24.5%)
		50 and above	21 (34.4%)
Job title		Nationality	
Manager	18 (29.5%)	Australian	30 (49.1%)
Top HR manager	15 (24.5%)	Malaysian	12 (19.6%)
General Manager	6 (9.8%)	British	2 (3.2%)
Top Manager	3 (4.9%)	Nigerian	2 (3.2%)
No response	19 (31%)	Other	15 (24.5%)
Company size		Industry	
Less than 1,000	26 (42.6%)	Construction	20 (32.7%)
1,001-2,000	8 (13.1%)	Transportation	14 (22.9%)
2,001-3,000	7 (11.4%)	Consulting	5 (8.1%)
More than 3,000	20 (32.7%)	Mining	5 (8.1%)
		Other	17 (27.8%)

An online survey was undertaken in order to obtain rich data. There were 1121 identified managers who have undertaken non-traditional assignments. They were

identified based on their online profiles and also from a human resource database which was available for purchase. In total 157 managers responded to the survey, but only 61 responses were deemed useable.

The profile of survey respondents were presented in two ways, by their background and their current organisations at the time the study was conducted. The respondents were all professional managers from considerably large organisations.

The respondents were asked to describe an overseas assignment considered important in their careers and there was also a question about the length of the assignments. Forty four per cent of the respondents stated that their assignments were undertaken in less than one year.

Profile of the interviewees

The majority of the interviewees were male and only three were female. Sixty-five percent of the interviewees were from senior management levels and thirty-five per cent were from middle levels. The study sample was gathered from twenty-three organisations from different industries including banking, research and development, education, tobacco, tourism, energy, consulting, telecommunication, aviation, automobiles and hotels and food. Table 2 shows the profile summary of the interviewees.

Table 2. Profiles of interviewees

No	Gender	Position	Home country	Host country	Assignment Length	Industry
1	M	Manager	Singapore	China, Malaysia	Regularly	Research and Development
2	M	Corporate Trainer	Singapore	China, Indonesia India	3 weeks	Banking
3	M	Director	Singapore	Asia Pacific	3-4 months	Education
4	M	Assistant Professor	Australia	Malaysia/UK	Once a year	Education
5	M	Director	USA	China	3 weeks	Manufacturing
6	M	Director	Italy	Somalia, Guatemala, Pakistan	3-4 days	Tourism
7	M	Marketing Manager	Malaysia	Japan/Korea	1-2 weeks	Tourism
8	M	Deputy GM	Malaysia	Japan/Korea	1-2 weeks	Tourism
9	F	General Manager	Malaysia	Singapore	1 week	Tourism
10	M	General Manager	Malaysia	India, Indonesia	1 week	Tourism
11	M	Chairman	Malaysia	Korea		Tourism
12	M	Regional Operation Manager	UK	Malaysia	4 years	Energy/Oil
13	M	GIS Analyst	Malaysia	Australia	1-3 months	Consultancy
14	M	Technician	Malaysia	Australia	1-3 months	Telecommunication
15	M	Chief Engineer Asia Pacific	Australia	South East Asia, UK North America, Africa	4-6 months	Aviation
16	M	Regional IT Manager	Indonesia	Australia	2 years	Tobacco
17	F	Sales Manager	Indonesia	Singapore	1 week	Manufacturing
18	M	Product Control Manager	Australia	Japan	1 week	Automobile
19	F	Operation Manager	Malaysia	Thailand, Indonesia	1 month	Hotel
20	M	Storage Solution Architect	Malaysia	Australia	3 years	Banking
21	M	Food Safety Advisor	Australia	Caucasus	1-2 years	Food
22	M	Senior Analyst	German	Australia	7 months	Consultancy
23	M	Global Practice Leader	Australia	Asia	1-12 months	Energy/Mining

Table 3. Survey Respondents' responses

<p>Assists Offices In Peak Periods By Sharing Resources (SA) Provides Company Support And Counselling (MR) Handles Baggage Handy System (SA) Bring Indonesian Staff To Australia To Be Trained In Plant Techniques Ready For The Commissioning Of A NePlant To Commence In Indonesia This Year (SA) Undertakes Business Improvement (SA) Handles Customer Service (MR) Delivers Training (SA) Handles Development And Evaluation Of New International Business Footprint (SA) Undertakes Development Of Feasibility Assessment For New Location (SA) Undertakes Development Of The Nation (SA) Handles Dual Objectives Of Completing A Defined Piece Of Work And Development For Employee (SA) Ensures People Are Looked After Within The Organisation (MR) Handles Functional Leadership And Advisory Services In Support Of Business Build Out (SA) Undertakes Business (SA) Gains Exposure And Experience In Industry And To Address A Particular Processing Problem At Host (GIE/TS) Integrates Resort Management In East Timor (SA) Introduces SAP System (SA) Learns Development And Up Skilling Of Management At A Location(SA) Manages Airport Operation And Passenger Movement (SA) Manages Airport Operation And Safety Air Craft Operation(SA) Manages And Upgrade Public Information Source (SA) Manages Property, Human Resources And Productivity (SA) Manages Management Of Project (SA) Manages Assistants For A Project (SA) Mentors And Trains Staff (SA) Handles Overseas Project (SA) Handles Terminal Operation And Management, Terminal Ground Operation And System (SA) Processes Project Work For Global Business Units (SA) Produces Workforce Plan For The Middle East Region (SA) Handles A Project Role – Fabrication (SA) Provides Advice And Support To A Division That Was Struggling (TS) Provides Separation Between Air Craft (SA) Provides Solutions, Supports For IT Storage Infrastructure (SA) Handles Public Relation (MR) Undertakes Research The Prospect Of Migrating Technology Platform To UK Market (SA) Reviews Of Operating Procedures (SA) Safety And Eypnditiousotain Traffic (SA) Set Up A QM System In Food Control (SA) Set Up An Office (SA) Handles Soil Stabilisation (SA) Supports Client Having Technical Difficulties (TS) Manages Talent And Organisation Mapping Exercise (SA) Manages Technical Sales And Marketing Of Raw Materials Being Mined And Shipped From Australia (SA) Undertake Work Mainly To Avoid Collision Between Air Craft (TS) Manages Management Of New Hotel (SA) Establishes, Advise/Implements A Program To Upgrade/Maintain The Police National Timor Leste Principle Police Training Centre In Dili (SA) Manages A Mining Project (SA) Recruits Expatriates From Botswana To Our HR Branch (SA) Supervises Air Traffic Control Officers Providing Air Traffic Control Service Following Rules And Regulations To Achieve Safe, Orderly And Expeditious Of Air Traffic (SA) Supervises Safe Operation Of Airport (SA) Trains Workers In Shoe Making Industry (SA) Undertakes A Construction Project (SA) Undertakes A Specific Project (SA) Updates Bank Accounts Of The Customers (SA) Undertakes Career Development Opportunity (GIE) Undertakes Few Non-Traditional Expatriate Assignments At Different Times (undetermined)</p> <p>*Note: SA=Specific Assignment/Project; MR = Maintaining Relationships; TS=Troubleshooting; GIE=Gaining International Experience</p>

All of the interviewees had travelled internationally regularly for short-term periods and the length of their journey ranged between a few days to one year. On average,

the interviewees travelled internationally several times a year and had been working in at least two different countries for business purposes. One interviewee was categorised as a

traditional expatriate, as he has been working in foreign countries for more than one year. The interviewee's comments on the non-traditional assignments were taken as important information as he was a non-traditional expatriate himself before he embarked on a traditional assignment. Almost all of the countries visited by interviewees were in Asia except for a few interviewees who have worked in Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Reasons for Using Non-Traditional Expatriate Assignment

The study found that there are four general reasons for using non-traditional expatriate assignments, 1) to implement a specific assignment (training and meeting or project); 2) to maintain relationships; 3) to identify and solve problems; and 4) to gain international experience. These results are consistent with Tahvanainen, Welch and Worm's (2005) study. Some evidence was found that shows the consistencies and inconsistencies of the reasons for using non-traditional and traditional assignments.

(1) Implementation of specific assignments or projects

Undertaking specific assignments or projects was shown to be the main aim of a non-traditional assignment. The assignments include managerial, process design information, purchasing know-how and transferring company's culture, policies and procedures to subsidiaries, expanding the company's market, preparing and developing new business plans, and leading and participating in major projects. These assignments were said to be undertaken in a short periods but sometimes took up to three years to complete.

Below is the statement of an interviewee who was a senior manager in an Australian energy/mining company.

'Leading and participating in major project feasibility studies (lots of these), business trips, there're about 1 to 12 months assignments. Also needed in early stages or actual construction projects. The assignments take generally between 3 to 9 months or some were taken between 1 to 12 months, where expertise was needed for a short period, some up to 3 years and installation of systems for 4 to 10 weeks assignments'

An interviewee who has worked for a bank in Singapore was sent to the bank's subsidiaries when there was a need for training. The bank manager had 25 years of experience working as a corporate trainer and had been providing training in different countries during the period. The manager reported that he had to travel to his organisation's subsidiaries to deliver training since he was the manager who is specialised in those fields at home office or since he took on the full responsibility for a project:

'I flew once a month, if not twice. I had to see clients and did a lot of training in the last 10 years of my career'

The statement of 'did a lot of training in the last 10 years' indicates that he travelled for training purposes, his job was a corporate trainer and it explains the reason for the assignments.

Another manager who also mentioned 'training' as his main assignment worked as a manager at a research and

development organisation in Singapore. When asked if he was a non-traditional manager, he replied that he was not. When probed to explain more he then explained that he had experience working with non-traditional managers. His statement is as follows:

'For short term they train people, for engineers they usually set up transfer technology knowledge, for regular business travelers it is quite common for them attending regional meetings, short term is also important for maintaining relationships ..'

An engineer who worked in an aviation company had more than 10 years experience and had been giving aviation safety training at different subsidiaries in the Asia Pacific region:

'My overseas assignments were for quality inspection and all aspects of aviation, procedures and policies were handled from manufacturers and also monitor the safety side, provide training courses, develop different training courses and updating the courses. From the engineering side, it involves developing standard, multipurpose trips; attend global meetings, technical meetings and safety meetings. For example one week was used to attend global meeting then technical or the safety meetings for 4 to 6 months'

When probed he continued, suggesting that:

'My assignments aim to deliver specific knowledge through different channels such as business trips, projects, meetings or training. As such, the managers who undertake non-traditional expatriate assignments are usually the ones that currently manage the field at home country'

The nature of the assignment is very specific. The knowledge is intended to be delivered through different channels, possibly because the period allocated for the assignment is short and completion is expected within the period. As such, the knowledge being transferred denotes the reasons for the assignment.

Meetings usually are undertaken within only a few days but projects and training can take up to a few weeks. Although, the period spent undertaking non-traditional expatriate assignments are generally short, this study found that some assignments could take longer. The cumulative length of non-traditional expatriate assignments can be more than one year. Based on responses given by an interviewee who was employed on monthly contracts, his contracts are only renewed if his skills were still needed in the location where his project was being undertaken.

Three interviewees mentioned 'training' as the key purpose of their assignments therefore, 'training' is one of the themes found in this study.

Knowledge Transfer Directions

Another aim of this study was to identify the knowledge transfer directions. The survey respondents rated the importance of these four directions, the first direction involves providing knowledge and skills to subsidiary, the second direction involves providing knowledge and skills to parent corporation, the third direction involves receiving knowledge and skills from parent corporation and finally,

the fourth direction involves receiving knowledge and skills from subsidiary as 88.2%, 87%, 77.1%, and 83.6%, respectively. All of the directions are perceived as important by non-traditional expatriates. This is supported by the explanation given by an aviation manager who said that he travelled around his company's affiliates to undertake different assignments within months. This manager had to provide knowledge at different locations and receive knowledge through his interaction with local managers he met during the implementation of his assignments. As such, non-traditional expatriates are important conduits to provide and receive knowledge. This supports our finding that the majority of the assignees believe that the knowledge directions occurred both from the parent corporations to subsidiaries and from subsidiaries to parent corporations.

(2) *Maintaining Relationships*

The second main role the interviewees frequently mentioned was that of maintaining relationships. Twenty-two percent of the managers agreed that the main reason for the non-traditional managers to travel was to meet clients, employees, and local managers.

An assistant professor who worked for a British international university that has a branch in Malaysia reported that:

'I have to be in Malaysia for 20 weeks and in China for 10 weeks to establish relationships but it is hard to do so if you fly in and out'

Interviewees from tourism organisations also placed a great importance on this reason. A chairperson for a tourism board stated that:

'I have to build key relationships with key people and develop a strategic marketing vision, our board spent thousand of dollars to create a network, such as providing them air tickets to come here'.

When probed he said:

'my main assignment is to build relationships with key people and convince them why they need to come here, the key person is the one who is responsible to tell the public such as a minister'.

A corporate manager's statement was recorded as follows;

'I provide entertainment to local managers, train staff children and try to create a family network and a team'

A director from a tourism organisation suggested that his role was:

'to create relationships through drinking sessions and have to adapt, it is a serious task'.

Most interviewees reported that relationships are built by socialising, such as taking business partners and customers out for dinner or drinks, providing funds for promotional purposes, giving gifts, and entertaining clients' children. They needed to meet clients, customers, or local staff in order to build relationships to develop trust, integrity, and their clients' confidence. More importantly, there were business deals to obtain. Among the survey respondents, 6.6% reported that the reasons for their assignments were

for providing services to customers, support, taking care of customers' concerns and needs, and for the purposes of public relations. Some interviewees (22%) mentioned that, for relationship maintenance purposes they had to meet customers physically and their assignments could not be completed fully using information communication technology (ICT). Several other interviewees mentioned that they needed to be physically present to carry out their assignments. In addition to the given reasons that required their presence, some of them even mentioned that the presence of parent country's manager increased the level of a customer's confidence.

(3) *Problem Solving or troubleshooting*

The following response from a sales manager who was sent to identify why sales were decreasing shows that a manager was sent to troubleshoot a situation currently faced by the manager's organisation:

'every three months, I have to travel for to a few countries, have to do it if sales is decreasing and find the reasons, why it is happening and have to deal with customers'

A manager from a mining company from Australia said; *'troubleshooting business or technical problems, there were many of these as these were the works of technology group'*

A corporate trainer said;

'I had to travel overseas, if there was a gap between me and overseas managers, I have to train them'

Managers were sent abroad to handle unexpected problems or difficulties. This aim is supported by the responses given by a food safety advisor who was called to remediate deficiencies in food hygiene and to provide food safety measures in his organisation subsidiary:

'...to remediate the deficiencies in food hygiene'

A minority of interviewees (17%) explained that their assignments were for taking corrective action. Overall, a large majority of the respondents (78.4%) perceived that problem solving is a key reason for using non-traditional assignment. It was found that problems were identified before sending managers to overcome the situations. Both of the assignments described above were urgent and needed immediate actions. According to the interviewees, the assignments were generally undertaken within a short period but that their length was highly dependent on the level of seriousness of the problem. The sales manager was away only a week but it took a month for the food advisor to solve the problem since the problem was more serious than the sales manager's problem. It appears that the selected managers are skilled and knowledgeable to handle the problems.

Thus, based on the responses given, the researchers concluded that the third reason for using non-traditional assignments is for troubleshooting or problem solving.

(4) *Gaining international experience (Management Development)*

The statements given by the interviewees showed that regular overseas trips were mostly undertaken to the same

countries and some managers mentioned that they gained some international experience. Although, the interviewees did not specifically mention that this was one of their main reasons to travel, the assignments at least provided opportunities to gain international experience. There were indications that this one of the reasons to send managers overseas. When probed to explain if they have gained international experience, most of the interviewees said 'yes', 'of course' and 'absolutely'. Below are some of the illustrative responses:

'always get something like meeting different people'

'I learned culture, better if you know basic language, how to bow and say good morning'

'Usually where a key skill or experience is required or alternatively for a career development opportunity'

Half (50%) of the survey respondents perceived that training an assignee for a future positions at subsidiary was important, 70% of them perceived that training an assignee for future positions at headquarters was important, and 76.6% of the managers perceived that exposing assignees to an international environment in order to give him/her international experience was important. Conceptually, all of the items are defined as management development. Thus, the majority of the respondents perceived that the management development assignment is an important reason for using non-traditional expatriate assignments.

The management development assignment is aimed to train assignees and also to enable them to gain experience through meetings, training, or other activities. With regard to the relationship between age and exposing assignees to an international environment; it was found that 29% who were less than 40 years old perceived that this assignment was important. In contrast, the survey respondents who were in the group of 40 to 49 years old and above said that this assignment was less important (23%). This indicates that the management development assignment's aim is for younger managers who are being trained for future positions at different locations. This also shows that the assignment is used to provide junior managers with international exposure so that they can gain international experience to use when they are employed in main offices or branches. Further, by gaining experience, these junior managers will add value to the organisation and it is beneficial for their career development.

Relationships between Assignees' Backgrounds and the Perceived Key Reasons for Using Non-Traditional Assignments

The relationships between the respondents' backgrounds (including age, managerial level, and gender) and their perceptions of the importance of the use of non-traditional assignments were also analysed. Descriptive statistics and crosstabs analysis were used to ascertain the relationships between the two variables. The survey participants were asked to determine the importance of their overseas assignments. The ages being investigated in this study are divided into four different groups: 1) less than 30 years old,

2) between 30 to 39 years old, 3) between 40 to 49 years old, and 4) 50 years old and above. These age groups can be categorised into two different levels: 1) a junior group that represents managers aged less than 39; and 2) a senior group that represents managers aged 40 years old and above.

It was noted that senior managers (40 years and above) perceived that the most important reasons for assignments are transferring knowledge and skills and taking corrective action. Managers who were aged less than 40 years old perceived the same reasons as important but put more emphasis on exposing assignees to the international environment in order to gain experience. To illustrate, an interviewee from Malaysia, who worked for a telecommunication company was assigned to design products, the jobs mostly used software or product design technology.

An interviewee who was also a junior manager from Malaysia undertook an assignment that was also related to technical skills development. This shows that young managers were skilled and worked on specialised knowledge. These examples are consistent with the result that junior managers are sent on non-traditional expatriate assignments mostly to complete technical-related jobs (skills) and to be exposed to international experience for career advancement purposes. Senior managers, on the other hand, indicated that transferring skills/knowledge was important to them. Since generally the experienced and talented managers mostly are senior managers, it can be concluded that senior managers are sent for non-traditional expatriate assignments particularly for higher level skills. Therefore, the assignees regardless of their ages perceived those non-traditional assignments were important, only the relative importance perceived by different age groups showed a difference.

In term of managerial levels, the study shows that the senior and middle level placed more or less importance on a few key purposes for these assignments. The results showed that senior managers place a high importance on 'taking corrective action' assignments (54%). This indicates that senior managers are more likely to be sent to solve problems. To illustrate, a director from Singapore flew to China to solve problems that his local managers were not able to solve. Thus, if the nature of the problem requires skilled, talented, and very experienced managers who have dealt with the problems before, a senior manager may be sent on the assignment. Three interviewees who were middle managers also undertook these assignments for reasons including decreasing sales, technical problems, and operational reasons. The evidence gathered shows that middle managers also perceived this assignment purpose as important (46%). Therefore, both levels undertake problem solving assignments and they both perceive it as important in their non-traditional expatriate assignments. The implementation, however, is undertaken differently by different managerial levels. For example, a senior level manager from a manufacturing industry said that he made

an initial trip to expand his business market and has consulted and negotiated business contracts with clients.

Middle-level non-traditional expatriates undertook assignments that had been implemented by senior-level managers. It can be concluded that senior non-traditional expatriates deal with more conceptual assignments that require their experience and skills, whereas middle non-traditional managers deal with assignments that involve more human and technical skills. This is consistent with the theory that conceptual, human, and technical skills are important to managers but certain skills are more important to one manager than to another manager (Katz, 1986). Another example, a senior non-traditional assignee was sent overseas to explore new and major assignments such as exploring a new market, learning new strategies, implementing major decision making, and starting new relationships with foreign countries. Middle non-traditional assignees usually embark on previously implemented assignments such as continuing a relationship or business operations that have been started previously. The interviewees from the tourism industry mentioned that they needed to travel overseas to build rapport with their business contacts or clients. These relationships had been developed previously by their superiors, as illustrated by a chairperson from a tourism organisation who was interviewed in this study. Regardless of their management levels, expatriates from both management levels agreed that they have to spend time with the clients in their business. The difference identified is that senior managers deal with higher-ranking levels in foreign countries whereas middle managers deal with middle ranking managers. Senior non-traditional expatriates use more conceptual skills. This leads them to carry out more assignments that involve decision making, creating and building new strategies, and transferring new plans and strategies. Since middle-level non-traditional expatriates use more human and technical skills, their assignments are more focused on getting instructions from superiors on their international assignments. Therefore, middle-level managers play roles as 'executors' rather than 'thinkers.'

From a gender perspective, it is important to note that the majority of the respondents in this study were male. Male managers are the dominant gender in traditional assignments; they are also a majority in non-traditional assignments.

More than half of the male managers placed importance on the purposes of transferring knowledge and skills, and 40 per cent placed importance on exposing assignees to the international environment. The female managers perceived that among all the assignments, they perceived importance on transferring specific company's culture, policies and procedures to subsidiary (40%) or control.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This study found the four main reasons for using non-traditional expatriate assignments are: implementing

specific assignments and knowledge transfer, maintaining relationships, troubleshooting or problem-solving, and gaining international experience. The assignments were mainly undertaken for short periods for different purposes such as training, meetings, or projects. Skills transfer is related to this assignment since the assignees must possess skills in particular fields. When an assignment requires a short period to complete and does not warrant a traditional expatriate assignment, organisations use non-traditional assignments. Traditional assignments, on the other hand, are more complex and time-consuming. They involve tasks such as position-filling that may involve assignments for a period of at least three years. The assignment requires adaptation and an understanding of foreign culture, which needs a long period to adapt. As such, the differences indicate that non-traditional expatriate assignments cannot be replaced by traditional expatriate assignments.

The knowledge transfer directions were found to be mostly from subsidiaries. They provide knowledge and skills to the parent corporation, receive knowledge and skills from subsidiaries and receive knowledge and skills from the parent corporation. This study confirms that non-traditional assignees, although travelling mostly for short-term periods, dispersed and received knowledge as well.

The second main role the interviewees frequently mentioned was that of maintaining relationships. One non-traditional assignee had undertaken a few assignments before he returned home. He undertook a series of assignments, and carried out the same assignments on a regular basis. His assignments included global business meetings, technical meetings, and safety meetings. The several purposes of his series of trips took him between 4-6 months to complete. Therefore, this non-traditional assignee has multi-purpose assignments and makes a series of trips. In a narrow sense, assignees are possibly able to build and maintain relationships with clients or local managers by meeting them a few times for substantial periods.

High quality relationships can be developed through face-to-face meetings and are very important in some countries. In a country where trust, integrity, and personal contacts are major priorities in business negotiations, a manager has to meet and build a good rapport with customers or business partners to start or build a relationship (Haake, Schummer, & Haake, 2003). The interviewees stated that usually this relationship is built by socialising with them. Socialising includes taking business partners and customers out for dinner or drinks, providing funds for promotional purposes, giving gifts, and entertaining clients' children. Almost all of the respondents stated that information communication technology (ICT) tools could be used to facilitate communication. However, they also believed that these tools were not equivalent to face-to-face meetings, especially in terms of developing a relationship between business partners, customers, or host country employees. One respondent was sent to a subsidiary specifically to socialise with the local managers. Therefore,

building relationships is another important reason for sending managers on non-traditional expatriate assignments.

The third reason for using the assignment is for management development. This assignment is aimed at exposing young managers to international assignments and, thus, they may be able to use it for their career development. Middle managers mostly perceived this assignment as being very important to them. Unlike senior managers, skills transfer is their main purpose for a non-traditional expatriate assignment.

Problem solving or troubleshooting is confirmed as another main aim of the non-traditional expatriate assignment. Managers are selected based on the problems which have been identified at the headquarter level and then the organisation sends someone who is capable of solving the problems. These assignees serve different purposes concurrently: 1) they undertake the assignments for the stated reasons and 2) they expose themselves to international environments. As such, they gain international experience, which can be used at head offices or at branches. For career development purposes, a junior manager might be attracted to international assignments. This may provide organisations with a pool of available managers.

The reasons for using non-traditional expatriate assignments have been discussed and the selection is now proposed based on our research. This selection is expected to facilitate practitioners in making decisions, particularly when designing selection or compensation packages for non-traditional expatriate managers. Referring to the well-developed model by Tahvanainen, Welch and Worm (2005), this study has added to the reasons for using non-traditional expatriate assignments by providing detailed descriptions of non-traditional expatriate assignments. The assignment purposes identified may possibly assist practitioners to find and select suitable candidates for the assignments.

This study found that technical and managerial skills are important in the implementation of assignments. Therefore, these skills are significant indicators to use when selecting a suitable candidate. Additionally, most of the assignments undertaken by the participants in this study were for training, meetings, and projects. The training assignment, in particular, requires a manager that has knowledge about the training content. Apart from that, other criteria such as personality, good communication skills, and open-mindedness are some important characteristics for the assignments. It is even more important when the selected assignees have to deal with local clients or managers.

Since the most important item in the non-traditional expatriate assignments is skills, a candidate should possess the skills required to undertake the intended assignment and selection can be made from available sources. Organisations are currently facing a shortage of assignees (Sparrow, Brewster, & Harris, 2004) so they should widen their choice to obtain assignees from their closest affiliates worldwide.

Position filling is the reason applicable for both

traditional and non-traditional expatriate assignments. Apparently, in non-traditional assignments, a position is filled by a manager for only a temporary basis. In traditional expatriate assignments, the manager who is sent to fill a position stays in the foreign country for a longer period. For management development purposes, both types of expatriate assignments are planned to provide managers with international exposure and to train them. However, in traditional assignments, the assignment takes longer to achieve its aims due to the socialisation process, which requires the managers to adapt to local cultures and to learn local behaviours. Controlling purposes appear to be carried out in both assignments as well. However, a greater importance on control is emphasised in traditional expatriate assignments. This is since the 'control by socialisation' suggested by Edstrom and Galbraith (1977) and Harzing (2001a) seems to be undertaken over a longer period. Clearly, non-traditional expatriate assignments are not designed to achieve this aim.

Therefore, this study questions the assertion made previously by some authors that traditional expatriate assignments are in retreat. Since the two types of assignments serve different purposes, the one cannot replace the other. Additionally, a few reasons such as controlling and position filling cannot be achieved by using non-traditional expatriate assignments.

Some positive effects have resulted from the emergence of non-traditional assignments. First, companies have alternatives to execute their international assignments. Second, the strategic implementation of international assignments can be undertaken within a short period and, thus, may be able to contribute immediate results. It is speculated that, overall, the traditional expatriate has some 'unique' competitive advantage such as the experience he or she gains during long-term assignments. The skills and experience gained are the most valuable experiences and can be used to enhance value to organisations and to the expatriates as well. Thus, it may be the reason why companies continue to utilise the traditional assignment (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992) despite its somewhat adverse image. Therefore, both assignments serve different purposes and have different aims. Organisations are using them in different situations and different countries depending on their business operations' needs.

Interestingly, non-traditional expatriate assignments are undertaken by skilled and specialised expatriates regardless of their age, gender, or managerial level. This can be seen from a range of managers' ages who participated in and have undertaken non-traditional expatriate assignments in this study. For example, a young interviewee mentioned that he was chosen from a pool of candidates from different subsidiaries in a region due to his knowledge about his organisation products. Any available and skilful managers, regardless of their background factors, can be selected to undertake non-traditional expatriate assignments. Therefore, the headquarters does not 'headhunt' for someone in a high

managerial position but, instead, look for someone who is skilful, mobile, and suitable for the identified assignments.

Some of the interviewees mentioned that the aim of non-traditional assignment was not necessarily to cut costs. Investigation on the background of the interviewees was carried out to obtain clearer explanation. The investigation revealed that the managers who said that non-traditional expatriate assignments were not necessarily used to cut costs were from large companies. One interviewee stated that 'my organisation is not being restricted on travel or cost.' This interviewee worked for a large aviation company that operates worldwide. The interviewee was needed in different locations to serve different specific assignments such as meetings, training, and discussion and to undertake his work as an aviation engineer. The manager was transferred from one location to another location to serve different organisational needs. In order to serve or fulfil these needs, his organisation paid for travel allowance, insurance, and airline tickets.

Therefore, we can conclude that an organisation has to bear related costs to serve their international business operational needs and that the completion of a non-traditional expatriate assignment is more important than the costs involved. However, a manager who worked for a bank said that non-traditional expatriate assignments were for cutting costs. In his statement he clearly said that training should be undertaken briefly and quickly since the competition was stiff, particularly in the banking industry. An examination of his background revealed that he worked for one of the major banks in Singapore. Since both of these managers worked in large organisations, this matter merits further investigation. Influential factors such as an organisation's profit, size, goals, and industry need to be examined in order to obtain more evidence so that a conclusion can be made. Therefore, based on the statements of the professional managers, cutting cost is not necessarily the primary reason why organisations use non-traditional expatriate assignments. Instead, it appears that they use them primarily to complete a specific aim. Additional empirical studies need to be conducted to achieve a more conclusive finding. In conclusion cutting cost appears to become a major purpose, however only in a particular situation or if the situation permits the organisation to do so.

Recently, it has been suggested that the increasing shortage of international managers has become an increasing problem for international organisations and has been a significant constraint on the implementation of global strategies (Scullion & Dowling, 2011). To overcome this situation, organisations are recruiting younger international managers by sending them on non-traditional expatriate assignments. Further, one report says that selecting non-traditional assignees is mostly informal (Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005) and may become an attractive option to organisations. Traditional expatriate assignments, on the other hand, have been known as problematic assignments and, thus, this may have prompted

organisations to choose non-traditional expatriate assignments. Since international organisations are competing for talent, the competition has become global (Sparrow *et al.*, 2004), retaining experienced employees and managing repatriates has become difficult, and organisations have had to recruit more talented young expatriates to serve their international operations' needs. As such, organisations use non-traditional expatriate assignments to expose younger managers to international environments to gain experience and to train them to become skilled and knowledgeable managers.

This study has several limitations. Firstly, it was the aim of the researchers to obtain data from a broad range of industries so that broader generalisations might be made. Due to the small responses gathered this aim was unachievable. Secondly, a partial mixed methodology was employed, but quantitative analysis proved difficult for the latter reason. Thirdly, the Asia-Pacific context of the study restricts the findings to the region rather than more generally.

Future researchers might aim to attract larger samples, more comprehensive industry representation, or to conduct comparative global studies, in order to contribute to our aggregated knowledge of the characteristics of non-traditional expatriate assignments.

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