RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

What Happens on Tour, Stays on Tour: Failure and Teams on Short Term International Assignment

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports an investigation in the relatively under researched topic of individual responses from engagements in teams on short term international assignment. The existing international human resource management literature focuses primarily on long term assignments and their impact on individuals. Through interviews with team members and HQ managers at three stages of the assignment process (before, during and after) three research questions are investigated. First, to what extent was the purpose of the assignments clearly defined? Second, to what extent was a prescribed approach to the management of the expatriate cycle used, and if not what factors prevented their application? Third, to what extent does poor team process on international assignment lead to project failure and serious business repercussions, such as lost opportunities, employee turnover and loss of reputation? Lessons are drawn from the experiences of these two teams that can be used to inform the management of international teams in practice. These lessons underscore the importance of understanding the constraints of context on the successful management of international teams.

INTRODUCTION

For many years a significant focus of global human resources management (GHRM) research has been the traditional long term expatriate (Bonache, Brewster & Suutari 2001, Brewster & Suutari 2005, Mayerhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl & Kollinger 2004). This emphasis remains the dominant area of interest, although increasingly work is being undertaken on non standard international assignments and independent expatriates using qualitative methodologies (Mayerhofer, et al. 2004, Tahvanainen, Welch & Worm 2005, McKenna & Richardson, 2007, Richardson 2008). Moreover, within conventional research, the focus tends to be on the individual expatriate rather than on teams of assignees.

The significance of global business is increasing. In line with this is an escalating need to sustain, develop and manage global operations. Organisations operating globally function in an intensely competitive environment (Sirkin, Hemerling & Bhattacharya 2008). In addition, the nature of this intense competition induces organisations that would not previously have considered going regional or global to engage in sub strategies. Critical to the development and management of global business operations are international assignees (expatriates) and global managers (Cappellen & Janssens 2008). Expatriates of all types fulfill multiple roles with multiple objectives for organisations. They are often central to the establishment of business in overseas locations; to the management of international partnerships; to project management; and as agents of knowledge and culture transfer (Au & Fukuda 2002, Riusala & Suutari 2004). Moreover, given that organisations from developing economies are now active and aggressive players in global business, the movement of expatriates is increasingly complex and multidimensional (Sirkin, et al. 2008).

An under researched, but vitally important type of expatriation is the team on short term international assignment. Teams are often sent on short term assignments for project work, establishing businesses, and/or to transfer knowledge. Drawing on two case studies of teams on short term international assignment this paper reports on

issues relating to their management and performance. One team was despatched to establish a new operation in Singapore, supporting clients who had moved to Southeast Asia. In this case the team were 'client following' as its rationale for entering this market location. In the case of the second team regional expansion was driven by opportunistic expansion; the organisation was invited to project manage an assignment for a government department in Thailand.

This paper considers, through two case studies of teams on short term international assignment, the relevance of prescriptions for the management of expatriates as contained in the relevant literature. In particular, the manuscript content seeks to emphasise that while prescriptions derived from research offer useful insights, the realities confronted by organisations and teams involved in short term team assignments are suggestive of a broader range of factors that influence team success or failure. Through case analysis of two teams on short term international assignment this paper reports on issues relating to their management, a relatively under researched area within contemporary GHRM.

The paper begins by reviewing literature on the management of traditional expatriates and its relevance for understanding the management of short term assignments and assignees. Much of this literature focuses on the individual assignee; and thus, second, in this paper, ideas concerning team effectiveness and performance are reviewed. Third, the teams and their organisations that are at the centre of the case studies are introduced. Next, the research design is discussed, before a presentation of the findings, implications for future research, and the practical lessons that might be deduced from the cases.

Literature Review

In recent years there has been a significant and fast paced change in the nature of global business in the form of cross border investment, joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions and other forms of partnership. In addition, small and medium sized businesses are increasingly seeking global opportunities (Brewster & Suutari 2005). Global developments of this kind bring a range of new areas for academic research in both global business generally, and global HRM more specifically. For example, until recently a major focus of attention in global HRM research was the traditional expatriate (long term assignee). However, recently research is being conducted into flexpatriates (Mayerhofer, et al. 2004), the short term assignee (Tahvanainen, et al. 2005), and the independent expatriate (Richardson 2008). There is, though, relatively little work on teams on short term international assignments. The idea of the strategic management of international assignments is often promoted. In the ideal case an organisation would recognise the strategic purpose of the assignment and then select assignees with the skills best suited to complete the associated tasks. It is important to emphasise, as some researchers have, that organisations often fill vacancies in an ad hoc way relative to staff availability and the willingness of this personnel to go on assignment as driven by the cost of the assignment and the timeline within which the assignment has to be completed (Brewster & Suutari 2005). Therefore, in reality the purpose of the assignment might be unrelated to key personnel through the domain of satisfying decision making. So while better decisions about the management of assignees might be made if all the processes involved were more considered, organisational and environmental realities often make this problematic.

The context of this study of two teams on short term international assignment attracts a primary research question. Posed as a succinct statement the research question is; to what extent was the purpose of the assignment clearly defined? Arguably, if the purpose of the assignment is clearly identified the process of selecting, preparing, rewarding and managing the performance of the team will be undertaken more effectively. In addition, it is likely that the transition of teams back into the organisation after the assignment will be smoother.

The Expatriation Cycle

The prescriptions for selecting, preparing, rewarding, managing performance, and managing reentry and career issues of international assignees (IA) have been largely derived from the strategic fit model of HRM (Boxall & Purcell 2003). This approach posits that in order to ensure that an international assignment will be successful it is important to identify the purpose(s) of an assignment in relation to business strategy. If the purpose(s) are clear it should be possible to manage the 'expatriate cycle' (selection, preparation for assignment, rewards, performance, reentry) in a systematic and rational way. The extant literature in these areas has generally agreed upon the 'best practices' that appear to have validity for application to the management of expatriates.

The prescriptive literature on the selection of long term expatriates has emphasised the importance of technical ability (Selmer 2004), cross cultural suitability (Mendenhall & Oddou 1985, Sunkyu & Gentry 2005) and family requirements (Caligiuri, Hyland, Apama & Bross 1998) as factors in the selection of IA. This literature has also identified requirements of the assignment, country/cultural requirements and language ability as important environmental factors that should be taken into account (Graf & Harland 2005). Despite a considerable literature invoking these factors some researchers have questioned their practicality (Brewster & Suutari 2005). For example, in their study of short term assignments Tahvanainen, et al. (2005: 666) argued that it "...seemed to be a rule rather

than an exception that formal selection is not conducted for short term assignments.", although the HR managers interviewed for the study indicated that a more genuine selection process would be preferred.

The short term planning horizons that often accompany decisions about international assignments make for the impracticality of long drawn out selection processes. Furthermore, decisions about international assignments are often made in informal ways (Bonache, et al. 2001, Brewster & Suutari 2005). This potentially places more importance on the preparation and support of IA once selected. Much study has been undertaken on the preparation of assignees for international assignment, with continuing debate and doubts concerning its utility (Forster 2000, Littrell & Salas 2005, Waxin & Panaccio 2005). Frameworks emphasising the importance of cultural and environmental orientation, cultural assimilators, sensitivity training, field experiences and language training have been developed (Littrell & Salas 2005). Preparation for family members is also increasingly emphasised in the literature (Andreason 2003). In their study of short term assignments Tahvanainen, et al. (2005) found that country specific or cross cultural training is rarely offered or given. One reason offered to explain this was the short notice given to an expatriate before departure.

The activities of many HRM departments dealing with international assignments are often consumed by issues relating to rewards (Nurney 2001). Research on the traditional expatriate has stressed the predominance of the balance sheet approach, or maintaining a standard of living similar to that expected in the home country, and the importance of equalisation, or the reimbursement of certain taxes (Brewster & Suutari 2005). With this approach the expatriate enjoys a standard of living no worse than that in the home country. The 'balance sheet' approach tends to ignore any strategic dimension to global rewards and is essentially an administrative approach to ensure that assignments can be filled. As Bonache, et al. (2001) point out, this approach is often a source of expatriate dissatisfaction and it is unrelated to the purposes of the assignment and the role of the expatriate. Tahvanainen, et al. (2005) found that for short term assignments up to six months, salary payments remain a home country responsibility and a company's travel policy is the basis for the compensation of employees.

Reentry or repatriation is an important element of the expatriation cycle typically associated with the long term expatriate. Research indicates that it is a difficult process for the expatriate and his/her family and is often poorly managed by organisations (Leiba-O'Sullivan 2002, Suutari & Milla 2004, MacDonald & Arthur 2005). Of particular concern to the individual is the impact of the assignment on their career. A good deal of research suggests that expatriate assignments are undervalued and have a negative impact on career development (Benson & Pattie 2008). The problems associated with reentry for the traditional expatriate may not be relevant to the short term assignee. Some research suggests that it is less problematic in general, although the speed of the transition can be challenging (Tahvanainen, et al. 2005).

In the context of the present study an important research question is the extent to which prescribed approaches to the management of the expatriate cycle are used and useful in the management of teams on short term international assignment. From this theoretical underpinning the second research question is offered: to what extent was a prescribed approach to the management of the expatriate cycle used, and if not, what factors prevented their application?

Team Outcomes: Mediators of Performance

The team performance literature distinguishes between group process and group performance. Inputs are a function of selection of group members for the given assignment and resources made available to the team. Ensuring adequate input, however, is insufficient for positive group performance. There are many factors that mediate the input to outcome relationship. The literature has identified mediators that are important for positive group performance. For instance, research findings indicate that cohesive groups are more likely to participate in a coordinated pattern of behaviour (Levine & Moreland 1990). Similarly, highly cohesive groups spend more time planning and follow through on their plans (Gonzalez, Burke, Santuzzi & Bradley 2003). Task conflict, or disagreement around the work or team product, has also been associated with productive group processes and outcomes while interpersonal conflict has been linked with negative group process and outcomes (Ancona & Caldwell 1992).

Steiner (1972) proposed that when groups do not perform as well as anticipated it may be due to process loss. Groups often do not perform as well as their best member would if acting independently. Examples of potential process loss include: goal issues (LePine 2005); poor communication (De Vries, Van den Hoof & de Ridder 2006); role problems (Lessem & Baruch 2000, Leung, Chan & Lee 2003, Anderson & Sleap 2004); ineffective decision making (Wageman & Frederick 2005, Yen, Xiaocong, Shuang, Hanratty & Dumer 2006); poor conflict management (De Dreu 2006); lack of empowerment (Mathieu, Gilson & Ruddy 2006); inappropriate rewards systems (Mendibil & MacBryde 2006); and mismanagement of diversity (Horwitz 2005).

Teams are viewed as complex, adaptive, dynamic systems that exist within organisational, social, and cultural contexts. Most of the existing research focuses on teams that are embedded within organisational contexts that are familiar to each individual within the group. International teams on short term assignment have the added

challenge of working in a new context that they are asked to discover and function within as a unit. There is little work on how organisations deal with problems that may arise when teams are on short term international assignments.

The measurement of group performance is a challenge for group researchers in general (Koslowski, Brown, Weissbein, Cannon-Bowers & Salas 2000). It is difficult to evaluate the impact of group efforts on organisational outcomes since there are a variety of factors not within an individual's control that impact on performance (e.g., external labour market conditions). In short, a 'bottom line measure' is often contaminated and/or deficient since it is difficult to distinguish between individual effort and other extraneous effects (Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler & Weick 1970). Nevertheless, in the context of this manuscript group performance is defined as meeting the business objectives as set out by the expatriate assignment, where these objectives are able to be clearly defined. And based on the limited research and the presented imperatives the third research question can be stated as: to what extent do characteristics of the team lead to project failure and serious business repercussions, such as lost opportunities, employee turnover and loss of reputation?

In the following section the methodological approach is described. The aim of this research was to conduct two in-depth, qualitative case studies of teams at three stages of an international assignment. Case studies built on information gathered from interviews with team members offer important insights into the operation of teams 'in action' in particular sets of circumstances. Furthermore, conversations with team members were fluid and dynamic around issues relating to the research questions.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study participants are identified as Team A and Table B. Team A is part of a large American multinational information technology services provider, located in over 40 countries and headquartered in the United States. The members of Team A, who are an ethnically diverse group of experienced and high potential men and women, are on an assignment in Singapore. The organisation services the IT needs of corporate customers in a variety of industries. An industry in which it has considerable experience and expertise is the automotive sector and it is typical for this organisation to move into new geographic markets as its large automotive customers expand into them. Expansion of its customers into the Asia Pacific region in the last ten years has led to such opportunities. In particular the organisation needed to establish a new start up operation in Singapore.

Team B was located in Bangkok and members were employees of a small Australian organisation of approximately 200 staff. The members of Team B are gender diverse, but lack ethnic diversity and international experience. The organisation in which Team B was located offered IT consulting services primarily to small businesses in Canberra, Australia. However, in recent years it was being approached by small businesses throughout Australia and in 2002 had been approached by the Thai government to implement an IT system for the Thai Customs Department.

Procedure

The case study method differs from experimental and survey methods in five main ways. First, the case study method is concerned with the investigation of a relatively small number of cases. Second, information that is gathered and analysed tends to include a large number of features of each case. Third, it is the study of naturally occurring data where the control of variables and measuring their effects is not a concern. Fourth, qualitative data is privileged over quantitative data. Fifth, generalisation is not a prime concern, although lessons may be learned from cases that have wider implications (Hammersley & Gomm 2002).

Using interviews at three stages of the team assignment process important insights were gained into the significance of context on team performance. The first author initiated a research project to conduct in-depth, semi structured interviews at three stages of the team assignment process. All team members and the responsible HQ director would be interviewed within one week of arriving in Singapore (Team A) and Bangkok (Team B). The responsible HQ person(s) were interviewed by telephone in Hong Kong (Team A) and Canberra (Team B). Both assignments were planned to last between six and nine months and a second set of interviews with the teams was undertaken approximately four months into the assignment. Final interviews were conducted about one week before Team A was repatriated from Singapore, and four days after Team B returned to Canberra.

Measures

The semi structured interviews were focused around the three main research questions, which are listed. However, it should be noted that conversations developed in a fluid and dynamic way.

Research Question 1

In relation to research question one, team members and the HQ directors were invited to comment on the degree of planning that went into the assignment; how clear the purpose of the assignment and objectives were and; and how they would sum up the assignment against its purpose and objectives.

Research Question 2

Participants were invited to discuss the extent to which a prescribed approach to the management of the expatriate cycle was used and, if not, what factors prevented their application? Team members and directors were asked about the processes involved in selection, preparation, rewards, reentry, cross cultural suitability. They were also asked what factors prevented a more systematic approach to these matters, and why certain processes were ultimately chosen.

Research Question 3

The team members and HQ directors were asked to comment on the extent to which characteristics of their team on international assignment led to project failure and serious business repercussions, such as lost opportunities, employee turnover and loss of reputation? Possible characteristics that might impede group performance include poor communication, conflict, lack of cohesion and other factors reviewed earlier. Participants were asked how they would gauge the success/failure of the assignment and what implications its success or failure has for the business.

Analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and then manually analysed using template analysis (King 1998). The key themes for analysis centred on the three research questions: (a) To what extent was the purpose of the assignment clearly defined? (b) To what extent was a prescribed approach to the management of the expatriate cycle used, and if not, what factors prevented their application? (c) To what extent does poor team process on international assignment lead to project failure and serious business repercussions, such as lost opportunities, employee turnover and loss of reputation?

RESULTS

The findings of the case studies will be examined as they relate to the research questions. Prominent contributions of executive managers who were linked with Team A and Team B, as well as dialogue from the team members are given. The comments made by the interviewees are shown in italics and each team is addressed in sequence (Team A first) to probe the research question (e.g., To what extent was the purpose of the assignment clearly defined?).

1. To what extent was the purpose of the assignment clearly defined?

Team A

Contributions were initially obtained from the regional HR director, and subsequently, from team members. Anonymity of all the participants was preserved. The regional director, who was based in Hong Kong, was the HQ coordinator for the project. In the first interview with the HR director she emphasised that because the organisation had so much experience of establishing support operations for its clients in the Americas and Europe the purposes of the assignment were very clear from the beginning. To a large extent it involved a replication of work that had been undertaken in other locations when establishing business operations: "we have a good template for what should be done" (HR regional director). The seven team members, all interviewed in their first week in Singapore, agreed, and although none of them had significant Asian experience they felt that the experience of the company in other markets could be transferred. As one very experienced male member of the team indicated, "we

feel that we are clear as to what needs to be done; some of us on this team have done it several times before" (Bill).

The success of the assignment would be very closely associated with the success of the organisation's automotive client in Asian markets. When interviews were conducted after about fourteen weeks, however, confidence of success was not so high. The regional HR director noted.

> "There have been issues. Our client is not establishing themselves particularly well and our team is a little stuck. It can only move as quickly as our client and this is a problem. Also, because our established markets are a cash cow for us senior management in North America is distanced from this team. I think they expected quick results and they're not coming." (HR regional director)

Team members were also worried about the changing situation. They felt that the inability of their client to establish itself was influencing what they could do. Their purpose was primarily to support the major client, but they had very little influence on how it conducted its business operation. They were beginning to feel that the original purpose for their assignment was too rigid: "Essentially we cannot move until our client does" (Joe). This was developing into collective frustration: "here we are in a new market, many opportunities, but we are stuck" (Maeve). While they were waiting for their client to move forward they were unable to develop business through other avenues and pursue local clients. This was not because the team lacked connections in this situation; they had many. It was because the management in the parent organisation would not 'free' them to pursue other opportunities.

Approximately eight months into the assignment it was decided that the team members should be repatriated to their respective home countries. Final interviews were conducted one week before the team members left Singapore. The regional HR director had come to Singapore to oversee the closing down of the office and was interviewed in person. She explained that North American HQ had closed the operation down as it was "going nowhere". She agreed with their assessment.

> "We could not achieve the purposes set out because our major client was just not able to get things moving quickly enough in Asia. We have learned a lot from this experience and we moved to start things up too soon. In general we could have lost a lot of money, but we have come out relatively unscathed."

Such an opinion was not supported by the team members. They noted that the whole project had been a waste of time.

> "We were limited and restricted by the purpose of the assignment and we were not empowered to use the time we had available to investigate the market. This would have been great for the company but they didn't want it." (Maeve)

The team members felt that over the eight months of the assignment they had become isolated from global and regional HQ. Once the initial purpose of the project could not be achieved senior management seemed to cast them off. "After about three months we were looking for permission to explore other opportunities, but we never got it" (Jeff).

Team B

Input in terms of the research questions, was obtained from the Operations Director and the participants of Team B. The Operations Director was coordinating the project from Canberra, Australia. "This is a first for us, outside of Australia, we are running on empty inasmuch as we have responded quickly and will probably learn by doing" (Operations Director). It was clear that the Operations Director was excited about the opportunity, but had very little idea what might be involved in managing a team in Thailand. "The purpose is to help the Thai Customs Department to automate its operation. Until our team gets there this is all we know, but it shouldn't take long to sort things out" (Operations Director). The Operations Director had a general sense of the purpose of the assignment but no preliminary work would be done on Thailand, the client or the project.

Team members were interviewed within three days of arriving in Bangkok. The team leader, Simon, was a particularly dominant character. "It won't take long to sort this out. We have experience of automating office systems in Oz, this will be a piece of cake". The other members of the team were a little more circumspect expressing the view that some preliminary visits might have been useful from a project point of view, but also for cultural adjustment. This view was particularly strongly expressed by the two women on the team. "I don't think we can treat this situation as if it was Canberra or Sydney. None of this team has been to Thailand before and only two of us have ever been in Asia, and that was Bali" (Diane).

After three months a second interview was conducted with the Operations Director. His point of contact in Thailand was with the team leader, Simon. Pertinently, the Operations Director had not visited the team - "I'm just

too busy" - he felt that things were going well. "Simon has indicated that things are going according to our nine month timeline and are on target. He established the deliverables after arrival and the team seems to be working well". But interviews with team members in Bangkok were not quite so positive. Simon was upbeat about the project. "Things are going well but the Thais are hopeless and have no idea. Their paper systems are a shambles and we are not moving very quickly".

Other team members had a similar view about the project. However, they were also reporting other worrying features of the assignment. There was a charged and difficult dynamic between the other men in the team and the two women. For instance, Pete, effectively Simon's lieutenant, indicated that the team had problems, and consequently, the project was not really moving forward.

> "When we arrived we thought it would be easy, we were wrong, we just had no idea about this environment. As a team we are also in big trouble. There is no agreement over the purpose of this thing, some team members, particularly the girls, have sort of opted out and we rarely discuss the project. There is nothing from home."

When Diane and Christine, the two female members of Team B, were interviewed they had another view. In their view the team had achieved 'meltdown'. The team leader lacked leadership and had no reliable contact with the home office. More worryingly, according to the two women, the men in the team were behaving in unethical and abusive ways.

> "Very shortly after we arrived here; in fact, not long after the first interviews, the guys started to visit Pat Pong (Bangkok sex district). Now it is a regular thing, they bring girls back to the complex and they treat us like dirt. The project is going nowhere, we know it, the client knows it, but Simon and Pete don't care." (Christine)

After just six months the Thai client cancelled the project and members of the team were repatriated by their company. The Operations Director put most of the blame on the client. He was not inclined to blame the team and was adamant that it was not the fault of Simon. He had still not managed to get to Bangkok. "Perhaps we should have planned things better and made the purpose clear. The client was most unhelpful, however Simon and his team just couldn't get support from them".

In Simon's third interview, which was conducted four days after their return to Australia, the failure of the assignment was placed squarely on the shoulders of the client. This was supported by the other men in the team and there was no mention of team problems that influenced the assignment. Diane and Christine, however, were very clear as to the reasons for the failure. They identified a lack of leadership from the home office and on the project. They indicated that the men in the team spent most of their time either thinking about or engaging in recreational activities, while the women had spent most of their time just doing what they were told and felt isolated and irrelevant. They did not want to report Simon, knowing he had a close relationship with the Operations Director. "I was told that what happens on tour stays on tour and to remember it. I did not feel I had the option to run away" (Diane).

In neither Team A nor Team B was the purpose of the assignment clearly defined. In Team A, while the initial purpose seemed clear, things changed dramatically as circumstances prevented this purpose from being achieved. Additionally, there was little flexibility given for the team to adjust its objectives and purpose when in Singapore. Team B had an ill defined purpose to begin with and this was only exacerbated as team process problems developed on assignment.

2. To what extent was a prescribed approach to the management of the expatriate cycle used, and if not what factors prevented their application?

Team A

The members of Team A were selected from a worldwide search and contained a mix of those considered experienced and high performing, in their late twenties and early thirties, and those who had successful experience of establishing operations. Technical ability was a primary consideration, together with a 'can-do' attitude. There was no formal selection procedure. Candidates were recommended by regional managers and regional HR to the HR director and department that had responsibility for the assignment and who was based in Hong Kong.

The selection process did not take into account cross cultural suitability, or family requirements since no family members were to accompany the team. There was a well planned preparation process before the assignment and Team A were together for two weeks in the UK before leaving for Singapore. Since there was to be little contact with Singaporeans in the workplace, the selection process did not consider the cross cultural suitability of team

members. When interviewed team members did not feel that this was a problem. They suggested that the assignment was clear, they would have relatively little to do with local employees and their preparation was fairly extensive. Even as problems developed within the project adjustment to the environment was never perceived as an issue.

Compensation was also not problematic for Team A. As the HR director indicated, "we take care of all tax issues and ensure that team members are better, not worse off, as a result of making the sacrifice". Members of the team emphasised that the organisation was keen that they focus on getting the job done, supporting the major client and being successful. Team members knew that if team members had problems with financial matters it could only detract from team performance on overseas assignment.

The goals and objectives of Team A's assignment was felt to be clear at the outset of the project. Yet, as the major client was unable to gain a foothold into Asia as quickly as was thought, Team A were unable to achieve their objectives. They were disappointed with the rigidity of the goals set for them and expressed a desire to adapt their objectives to suit the environment in ways that would enable some degree of success. They felt the North American HQ had held them back from making these changes.

The closure of the operation and the repatriation of team members would seem to have been smooth. All Team A members were guaranteed their previous positions in their respective home countries. It was not quite, however, this simple. Team members indicated that they felt demoralised and let down by senior management in North America. They also felt that they had received poor support from the regional HR director who was overseeing the project. Three team members commented directly that they would review their employment situation. "This project has given me an idea of my real value in this company. I have seen opportunities for myself in Asia that I want to pursue and I can probably do it better with someone else" (Victoria).

Team B

The opportunity to work on a major project in Thailand came very quickly for this organisation. It was the first time it had accepted a project outside of Australia. "We needed to get a team together quickly; it was really about getting volunteers" (Operations Director). In the first interview the Operations Director was clear that organising the team had been done in a haphazard way. He asked for volunteers and from these selected team members based on the kinds of skills that might be suitable for this project. "Up to now we had three different team leaders, those who initially volunteered pulled out. In the end I think we have the best available" (Operations Director). The Operations Director admitted there was no time for any sophisticated selection approach arguing that small businesses have to respond quickly to opportunities and cannot afford the time to 'mess around'. In the first interviews team members were excited about being in Bangkok, they had after all, volunteered. None of the team had been to Thailand before, and none had any Thai language capability.

One female member of the team was assigned the task of producing an orientation guide for other team members, but ultimately it was not distributed. The Operations Director emphasised that the company had no time for preparation of the team. "We didn't have the time or money to do anything". During the second interviews it was clear that there was a difference in perception of how adjusted the team were to the Thai client and environment. Simon, the team leader, and the male members of the team claimed that they had adjusted quickly, and had worked well with the Thai client and fitted into the Bangkok context easily. The views of the female members of the team were noticeably at odds with this. "The client does not trust us. The men in the team treat local women in the office as if they are all prostitutes. Simon and the others seem unable to control themselves, they are like kids in a chocolate factory" (Diane). There seems to be more to these comments than poor preparation for the assignment. The female members of the team implied that the males had become obsessed with the recreational and sexual aspects of life in Bangkok. "We are struggling in this environment, but the men seem to have been taken over by something" (Diane).

Shortly after the team returned to Australia the organisation was acquired by a British company. In their third interviews both Diane and Christine indicated that they were looking for alternative employment and would like to pursue opportunities in South East Asia. Two of the men in the team were handing in their notice to leave the week after the interview. Simon was staying, he felt no reason to leave, and showed no indication that the failure of the project had anything to do with him and his leadership.

3. To what extent does poor team process on international assignment lead to project failure and serious business repercussions, such as lost opportunities, employee turnover and loss of reputation?

Both Teams A and Team B failed to achieve the objectives of their assignments. However, without an understanding of the specific context of each it is difficult to prescribe solutions, if this is possible at all. Both teams had problems

that were related to one or more of goal issues; communications; role issues; decision making; conflict management; and empowerment. In the second interviews with members of Team A, for example, they articulated frustration at the inability to restructure goals in the light of their circumstances. They were concerned about the lack of communication from senior management in North America and how unempowered they were to change their focus while on the assignment. Team A were in collective agreement about the issues and their experience of the assignment. A number of them were looking for other employment opportunities. "This wasn't a failure, it was a failure of corporate leadership and a failure to realise we had a great opportunity to get a foot in Asia without our major client" (Jeff). A team with excellent intra team relationships and a desire to be successful felt constrained by senior management. The likely repercussions were that some or all of this team would leave the organisation and no growth was experienced in Asia by the organisation.

Whether Team B had performance problems depended on which team member was being interviewed. This in itself, of course, constitutes a problem. From the point of view of the Operations Director the performance problems were created by client limitations. Simon, the team leader, agreed with this view. The dynamics of the team were not perfect, but in his opinion the client these features constituted the main problem. The other male members of the team suggested that performance problems existed and the organisation might have done a better job of solving issues, particularly with the client. There seemed, however, to be a conspiracy of silence with respect to problems within the team itself. Diane and Christine were clear that the whole project was a disaster, in particular, leadership was ineffective, both of the team and from the Operations Director. There was poor communication with the team and they considered this to be because of the relationship between the Operations Director and Simon. The behaviour of the men in the team caused the team to split irretrievably early in the project; conflict was not managed; the client was isolated and effective decisions were not always made. The women themselves were isolated, felt impotent to do anything and completed what was left of an assignment to add to their curriculum vitae. "Our experience would make a great movie - nobody would possibly believe this sort of thing can go on in a business." (Christine)

DISCUSSION

This paper has reported two case studies of teams on short term international assignment. One was a multicultural team from a USA based multinational organisation, and the other was a team of Australians from a small Australian organisation. Both organisations were in the IT industry. Before discussing the implications arising from the case studies, it must be recognised that the study has limitations in its scope. It focuses on only two teams in two organisations, one American and the other Australian. The number of informants was small, but constituted all members of both teams. The focus of the study was to contribute further to an understanding of teams on short term international assignment. This is an area of research that requires more study.

The study findings reveal that in relation to all three of the research questions context is important. The purposes of assignments might be clearly outlined at the outset, but circumstances can often change the relevance of initial purposes. Second, the use of HRM 'best practices' in team formation, will be severely constrained by organisational circumstances and capability. Furthermore, some internationally experienced organisations develop their own specific 'best practices'. Third, context impacts significantly on team performance, and the abstracted design of teams ignores such factors. Finally, context can influence team processes to the extent that failure to be aware of its impact can have severe implications.

In relation to a number of key research questions the case studies did offer interesting comparisons. First, a large and experienced multinational organisation was compared with a small and globally inexperienced entity. Second, an American institute was compared with an Australian organisation. Third, a relatively ethnic diverse team was compared with a team with members of one nationality. In discussing the case studies the focus was on both lessons for the practice of managing teams on short term assignment and to advance suggestion where further research might be usefully undertaken.

The idea of defining the purpose and objectives of a team on a short term international assignment in advance makes obvious sense. Goal setting enables an organisation, when it has the time, to be much more systematic in terms of decisions about staffing the assignment and its management. From the case study of Team A, however, it is also clear that for reasons beyond the control of the team situations may change and original objectives may become difficult if not impossible to achieve. Under such circumstances contingencies need to be in place, or high performance teams need to be empowered to develop new objectives. Further research might usefully investigate how objectives can be made more flexible in high opportunity environments. In particular, Team A members felt that they suffered from an overly controlling USA HQ that was unwilling to risk empowering the Singapore based team. What are the key issues in this HQ - team relationship?

Team B embarked on their assignment with a lack of project purpose. There was a lack of advanced planning, perhaps because of time and capability, as it was a small organisation responding to an overseas opportunity. Specifically, there was a failure to establish project requirements before the whole team was sent to Bangkok; limited effort to select the best or appropriate team members; and scant opportunity for training or cross cultural

preparation. The case reported in this document is evidence of how some small businesses do not have the internal capability and do not seek external expertise to help them plan more effectively for operating overseas. From a practical point of view, and given the likelihood that increasing numbers of small businesses are either actively seeking, or have the opportunity to pursue overseas opportunities, the experience of the Australian organisation has relevance (Bonache, et al. 2001). Further research on how small businesses manage to gain a successful toehold in markets outside of their own, and particularly in very different contexts would assist small businesses pursuing such opportunities.

Team A membership was selected on expertise and past achievements. Indeed, the members were selected from a global pool, but the process of selection did not include sophisticated attempts at psychometric assessment, consideration of language or cross cultural suitability. The combination of these elements was partly because of the nature of the assignment, and also because the organisation felt that in the two weeks before getting to Singapore the prominent desirable team dynamics could be built in the UK as the organisation had experience of similar projects and this approach had worked previously. Nevertheless, the increasing complexity of contemporary business organisations has led to an awareness of the need for more constructive policies for selection, preparation, rewards and performance management. The pragmatic requirement to improve the effectiveness of firms in the global arena is impetus for further research that might usefully be undertaken on the cycle of managing teams on short term international assignments to better understand how organisations construct more substantive arrangements of incentive systems and work behaviours in cross cultural engagements.

Team B, in contrast, had no experience in the management of any kind of international assignment. Team members, who lacked a working knowledge against which to map more effective practices were constrained by expertise, size, time and finance. And while selected voluntary team membership might be indicative of work enthusiasm this team feature is unlikely to be a convincing substitute for a deficiency in skills and talents vital for employee performance in international engagements. Indeed, the rigorous preparation of personnel for effective dissimilar contexts can be of considerable resource expenditure in terms of time and finance. These problems were made worse by ineffective management of the assignment itself and indifferent control and coordination from the centre of the organisation under circumstances where it was required. It is likely that many things could have been done more effectively to establish the team without risking the opportunity in Thailand. Yet there are often dynamics in all organisations and particularly small ones, which will create interference in an effective management system. More careful selection would have helped and perhaps use of the external labour market to recruit international expertise. Preparation needed to be undertaken with respect to the client and the socio cultural environment in Bangkok. The Operations Director needed help in how to manage an offshore team. To do such things quickly is expensive, but for a small business hoping to break into regional and global markets this expenditure is far less expensive than the cost of failure. Further research on how small businesses deal with these issues, particularly as they relate to short term team assignments is necessary. In addition, the egos, characteristics and relationships of senior managers and team members are all pertinent to an understanding of what went wrong in Team B.

Some researchers have argued that high performance teams can be designed (Stewart 2006). In an ideal environment where the resources of time, people and money are available this might be feasible, but the evidence of the two case studies indicate that within their business realities organisations take what they believe to be the best course of action through using their experience (or lack of it) and judgement. This strategy may not fit the prescriptions of high performance team design. Team A reported having a fully functioning and cohesive set of relationships, and it was composed of high achievers and those with high potential as defined by the organisation. This team initially had a high degree of autonomy that decreased as the nature of the situation in Singapore changed. Despite being a cohesive team ready to perform to a high level the members were constrained by forces outside of their control to reveal the culture - contingent forces of the organisational settings. The impact of context on team performance seems to be of importance, and while designing a team for high performance in the abstract might appear attractive, circumstances can often dilute such design. Research might focus on these contextual features and how teams that are highly cohesive might be affected by them.

Work on the design of high performance teams needs to consider the contexts in which organisations operate. Team B, for example, lacked international experience, neither did it have the expertise, money or people to effectively undertake its Thailand project. The case study interviews highlighted a dysfunctional team in a dysfunctional organisation. Important research questions deriving from this case study would be related to how such organisations can be successful within the constraints of their situation. Examples of cases where small businesses have made short term team international assignments work successfully are important and practical guides for other small businesses pursuing such opportunities. Yet, limitations of resources are only one element that explains the failure of team B. It might be proposed that, as in most situations, teams cannot be designed ideally and that the management of the team has to be the focus of attention. In addition to the need for further research that investigates teams within their contexts and as they operate, the case study Team B in particular raises other important issues for further investigation. The issues of gender and race are important aspects of this case study and the connection to behaviour and ethics in the workplace. However, the hidden and often dark side of organisational life that is raised in this case requires further investigation and there is a growing body of academic concern for these issues.

Conclusion

The two case studies reported in this paper highlight the problems involved in the management of teams on short term international assignment. While there is much work on international assignments and international assignees, and team design and performance, there is relatively little on teams on short term international assignment. Consequently, there are many opportunities for further research, and particularly case based research that seeks to highlight the importance of context in the performance of teams on short term international assignment. This paper contributes to the relatively under researched area of teams on short term international assignment. The content of the manuscript focuses on two teams that failed on assignment for very different reasons, and highlights the range of issues that influence team performance on international assignment.

When teams operate in 'real' business situations the application of abstract prescriptions for their design and management are often wanting in utility. Prescribing what 'should be' is perhaps not as helpful as understanding what exactly has happened, and then deriving lessons from this information in specific circumstances. Yet to apply these lessons to other situations is itself fraught with complexity, personalities and people are different, the contexts are unique, and the problems and issues are specific. The view proposed in this paper, therefore, is not entirely sanguine. Given the constraints of situations within which businesses operate; of time, finance, people, resources and capabilities, not every variable that influences a successful assignment outcome can possibly be planned. Planning time is often not available, money may be scarce, managers and others may simply not be capable, experienced or trainable to produce a successful outcome. Sometimes things happen that cannot be planned for, controlled or managed and failure, and indeed success, follows.

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