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Onboarding self-initiated expatriates

The case of Icelandic employees working for the Nordic Cooperation

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper was to explore how Icelandic employees experienced the onboarding process when they started working for the Nordic co-operation.

Design/methodology/approach – A case study methodology was performed, where semi-structured interviews with Icelandic expatriates working for the Nordic co-operation were conducted, along with an open-ended questionnaire to the human resource manager. Relevant internet sites were analyzed along with job postings.

Findings – The results indicate that the Nordic co-operation could do better in relation to onboarding their new employees, particularly, in relation to the practical aspect of relocation. The expatriates reported to be satisfied with the work related onboarding and found a value in having a mentor or assigned individual who would take responsibility of introducing the new employee to work-related aspects.

Research limitations/implications – The number of interviews may be considered small when compared to other expatriate studies. Further, the results can only be considered as a first step in a longer process of mapping the ideal onboarding process for international assignees.

Practical implications – Based on the results, it was recommended that the Nordic co-operation should re-examine their onboarding, particularly, in relation to sharing practical information, and incorporating the spouse into the program, as suggested by a number of studies.

Social implications – By understanding the challenges self-initiated expatriates (SIE) face when taking up a new job in a new country, human resource departments will be in a better position to assist the assignee and family for a smoother transition.

Originality/value – In recent years, research on global carriers has been dominated by expatriate managers who are sent abroad on behalf of their company. However, far less is known about SIE and their onboarding process from the perspective of employee.

Keywords Human resource development, Self-initiated expatriates, On-boarding

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The world of business has been changing rapidly in the past decade with globalization becoming a key strategic necessity for organizations, and, as a result, there has been a growing interest among researchers on boundaryless employment (Altman and Baruch, 2012; Tarique and Schuler, 2010). Expatriates are defined as employees who work and live temporarily in a host location. They can be relocated on behalf of the company or be self-initiated expatriates (SIE), in which case the individual applies for a particular position in the host country. Some expatriates only take up one assignment in their career, and there are others who go on to



undertake multiple assignments during their employment (Andersen *et al.*, 2015). Prior research has identified some challenges for organizations that employ expatriates, such as recruitment, onboarding, commitment, retention of talent and work adjustment (Black *et al.*, 1991; Caligiuri *et al.*, 2009; Loes, 2015; Toivainen and Lallimo, 2012). Researchers have emphasized that an effective onboarding program can enhance performance and job satisfaction and can reduce the stress often associated with international relocation (Cole, 2008; Donovan and Radosevich, 1999; Johnson and Senges, 2010; Mariani *et al.*, 2013). As a result, the aim of this paper is to explore the onboarding program of SIE working for the Nordic co-operation. This regional co-operation includes Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and the Faroe Islands, as well as Greenland and Åland. The paper is organized into six main sections. Section 2 provides an overview of the literature on onboarding and SIE. The research methods used are introduced in Section 3, followed by a presentation of the results in Section 4. Section 5 provides further discussion of the results, followed by conclusions in Section 6.

2. Literature review

Recruiting between the Nordic countries is relatively easy, as they form a borderless region with a common labor market. The goal of the Nordic collaboration is, on the one hand, to make the Nordic countries attractive for residence, occupation and the running of companies and, on the other hand, to strengthen the Nordic countries internationally (Nordic Co-operation, 2016). The Nordic co-operation has a long history and dates back to 1952. There are two main bodies operating within the co-operation: the Nordic Council, an inter-parliamentary body, and the Nordic Council of Ministers, an inter-governmental body. A range of other Nordic organizations and associations also exist under the Nordic co-operation umbrella (Nordic Co-operation, 2016). Many of the employees working for the Nordic co-operation are SIE. They are not officially relocated on behalf of the co-operation, but apply for a particular position in the host country. Self-initiated foreign work experience is not a new phenomenon as such. It has gained increased attention (Myers and Pringle, 2005; Scullion *et al.*, 2007), although research on global careers has been dominated by expatriate managers who are sent abroad on behalf of their company (Vaiman and Haslberger, 2013). As stated previously, far less is known about SIE (Biemann and Andersen, 2010; Doherty, 2013; Vaiman and Haslberger, 2013). Quantitative studies by Inkson *et al.* (1997) and Inkson and Myers (2003) on SIE in New Zealand explored work experiences and career development and found that SIE report to have increased confidence and self-reliance. Vance's (2005) study on American SIE in Asia revealed that a number of the interviewees were married to host country nationals. Further, a study by Lee (2005) on SIE in Singapore revealed that organizations need to make sure that there is a fit between the job and the knowledge, skills and abilities of the employee. It has further been argued that SIE are more concerned with their personal development, as opposed to organizational development, which may result in conflicts, that in turn can lead to premature turnover. Gagnon *et al.* (2008) have argued that SIE lack long-term experience and tend to lack personal identification with their organization and alignment with company priorities and values. As a result, this may lead to less commitment and loyalty, as well as potentially sub-optimal – and perhaps predetermine – turnover. To address this, Vance *et al.* (2009) have emphasized the benefit of assigning a liaison officer to assist the newly hired

international assignee. They argue that such an arrangement can lead to an increased transfer of knowledge to the local workforce and can ensure the compliance and know-how of employees. Researchers have argued that individual adaptability, positive attitude and good self-esteem are important attributes for a successful expatriation; however, the importance of training and preparation for the international assignment have also been emphasized (Bennett *et al.*, 2000; Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.*, 2005; Caligiuri *et al.*, 2009).

Studies have shown that onboarding for local employees can be effective both for the employees and the organization itself, for example, in the form of increased performance, job satisfaction and loyalty to an organization (Allen *et al.*, 2004; Aryee *et al.*, 1996; Harris *et al.*, 2007). It is very important that the reception of new employees is successful, whether it is in a new workplace or overseas (Dealtry, 2008; Stanek, 2001; Vaiman and Haslberger, 2013). However, this applies particularly to expatriates and other employees who are far away from home. With a successful reception, it is possible to increase the newcomers' safety and decrease the strain and stress which often follows starting working in a new environment (Bennett *et al.*, 2000; Cole, 2008; Donovan and Radosevich, 1999; Johnson and Senges, 2010).

In the process of receiving new employees, many organizations have well-established onboarding programs. Onboarding is a synonym for certain processes that take place when a new employee starts working, such as how the new employee is introduced to new co-workers, the work environment and the new job (Black *et al.*, 1991; Dealtry, 2008; Doherty, 2013). The purpose of onboarding programs is to increase the confidence of the new employee and reduce stress and its symptoms. With successful onboarding, it is possible to shorten the time the employee needs to reach full capacity and, in addition, can create a positive connection with the organization. It has also been argued that it is important to follow up on the onboarding well after the first few weeks to be effective (Barney and Hesterly, 2008; Mankin, 2009). Scholars such as Stanek (2001) and D'Abate *et al.* (2012) have argued for global mentoring programs to be included in the process for international assignees, arguing that these should be a part of career development and can be beneficial both for the employee and the organization. The results of D'Abate *et al.*'s (2012) study suggest that both the individual and the organization would benefit from the mentoring program if strong strategic human resources development were applied. Although the above-mentioned studies have been an important contribution to the literature on expatriate management and onboarding in general, there is a gap represented by a lack of understanding of the onboarding of SIE. As a result, the aim of this study is to explore the onboarding of Icelandic SIE working for the Nordic co-operation.

3. Methodology

A case study approach was taken, as the aim of this study was to explore onboarding at the Nordic co-operation. Case studies are a form of qualitative research and are designed to examine, for example, one incidental occurrence such as that purposed in this paper (Hughes *et al.*, 2005). A case study is a story or a discussion of something unique, special or interesting, for example, organizations, programs, processes and events (Yin, 2003). Although case studies do not have a generalizing value, they do provide indications as to the experiences and perceptions of the respondents. As there is a lack of literature on onboarding for SIE, a case study was found to be a good method as a first step in

gathering information on onboarding from the SIE point of view. Data were collected by reviewing information on the Nordic co-operation website and via a Web survey with open response options, which was sent to the Human Resource Manager by e-mail. Further, to better understand the process of onboarding, websites about the Nordic co-operation and recruitment advertisements for jobs at the Nordic co-operation were analyzed, as well as other relevant internet sections. Respondents were selected with the research question in mind; they had to be currently working for the Nordic co-operation and to have been employees for more than six months. Multiple approaches to sampling were used to gain research access, such as snowballing, social contacts and an internet guide. Seven employees were located and interviewed. The study used a series of semi-structured interviews. Open-ended questions were used to bring out underlying patterns and relationships. The interviews were conducted from November 14, 2014, to December 19, 2014, and lasted for 30-50 min. The interviews were all conducted in Icelandic, and the verbatim quotations were translated into English. The interviews were recorded, conceptually transcribed (Yin, 2003; Esterberg, 2002) and analyzed, and key themes emerged regarding participants' experiences toward the onboarding. The plan was to conduct more interviews, but it turned out that few Icelanders were, at that time, working at the Nordic co-operation. Respondents resided in Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Norway and Sweden. The sample consists of four women and three men aged 38-62. The Icelandic employees worked as directors, managers, counsellors and consultants for the Nordic co-operation. The length of employment for the Nordic co-operation was from two to four years. All respondents had an undergraduate degree and a master's degree and one respondent had a doctoral degree. All of the participants were married or in a relationship and had children. One participant had two children who moved with him to the host location but moved back home before the assignment was completed. Two participants had a double household, one in Iceland and one in the host location.

4. Results

All participants reported that they experienced little or no formal reception, except from one participant who resided in the Faroe Islands. After the recruitment process was completed and he was offered the position, he went to visit the Faroe Islands for a week. Formal visits had been organized, where he met administrators and other representatives from the industry. The respondent reported this visit to have been very valuable and that it enabled him to "hit the ground running" when he officially started working. Another respondent residing in the Faroe Islands was, however, dissatisfied with the information he was given prior to his move, saying:

[...] for example, two representatives from the Council of Ministers participated in my final recruitment interview and there I got some information that was not correct. I was informed that the job would come with an apartment and a car. So I went home and told my spouse and we hoorayed a little over this [...].

The respondent negotiated the wages on the assumptions that he would get both an apartment and a car, but at the end of the negotiation period, he was informed that this was incorrect, resulting in having to re-negotiate his salary.

It seemed that the Nordic co-operation paid the relocation costs, but the amount varied between employees depending on whether they were working for the Nordic

Council or the Nordic Council of Ministers. Preparation and support for the arrival to the host country also appeared to be limited. One respondent said:

[...] when I came here I got support with moving my household inventory, a car and and [...] I kind of don't know [...] it was very little and you yourself had to find a place to live, get a social security number and register for social insurances.

Another respondent who had a prior experience working for an international organization and had a spouse and a child accompanying him on the assignment reported the following about the onboarding process: "There was not much beyond the recruitment interview". Another participant who had relocated with his family said: "[...] they paid for insurance, otherwise you just have to take care of yourselves and there are no recommendations regarding your spouse or children, no support in any way [...]". She reported that many of her co-workers had a small apartment in the host location but frequently travelled back home to where the family lived. The same respondent, however, described how well the locals had welcomed her and her family: at the school their children attended, parents and classmates would guide them and provide assistance in regard to the practicalities about which they knew little. Another respondent noted that it would have been beneficial to have received more support, but he relocated on his own for a few years and his spouse relocated afterwards.

In relation to work-related onboarding most of the interviewees had been assigned a supportive individual for the first days. These individuals would introduce them to the work environment and co-workers. An interviewee in Copenhagen described this as follows: "New staff always get a contact person or mentor or whatever it is called [...]". Another respondent had this to say when asked about whether he had received work related training:

[...] no not really, the one that had the job before me he quit just three or four months before I arrived, so I got no assistance but, however they are very welcoming the people here.

Another respondent reported that: "Nope, no, I think they have generally assumed that I knew what I was going out for [...]". Most respondents reported to be satisfied with the introduction to the job and work environment, and much of this was attributed to the mentor system and co-workers being generally welcoming. Many reported to have received folders or a handbook about work-related aspects. Others mentioned a few work-related mandatory courses. The respondents reported to have mainly relied on the local handbook, co-worker guidance and other relevant workplace handbooks and quality manuals. The same can be said for further development, but according to the respondents, employees could quite freely take advantage of many of the various courses and language learning opportunities offered. Continuing education, however, is coordinated by Human Resources and is related to the career developmental policy of the Nordic co-operation. The Human Resource Management department reported doing a needs analysis, according to the organizational goals.

5. Discussion

Local and global human resources refer to the accumulated knowledge, skills and abilities that individuals possess. Organizations need to know how to maintain and leverage their potential, and some multinationals have established their own schools or in-house training centers (Stanek, 2001). Newly hired employees generally undergo some form of training following the selection process. However, according to the Global

Mobility Trends Survey (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2015), about half of companies that operate internationally and utilize expatriates provided training for their employees. Research has further emphasized on the importance of preliminary visits to the host location (Dowling *et al.*, 1999). According to the respondents, all except one had the opportunity for a host country visit. Respondents reported the lack of practical assistance, not only in relation to local registration but also in relation to family and spousal affairs. Some reported to have received support from locals, particularly if they had children in school. When asked about work-related training, some of the respondents reported that their jobs were so narrow in scope that a general training program would not have been beneficial. However, those who had a mentor or were assigned a co-worker to help them become familiar with the organization's culture and other co-workers reported to be happy with the arrangement. This is in accordance with that found by Vance, Vaiman and Andersen and D'Abate *et al.* (2012) on the importance of assigning liaison officers and mentors for newly hired employees. Based on the results, it was recommended that the Nordic co-operation should re-examine their onboarding, particularly in relation to sharing practical information and incorporating spouses into the program, as suggested by Kawai and Strange (2014). A further study of the experiences of the spouses of SIE might be interesting, as research has indicated their important role in the adjustment process (Caligiuri *et al.*, 1998). Although the findings of this study provide implications for further research and practice, their interpretation is subject to a number of limitations. The number of interviews may be considered small when compared to other expatriate studies. Further, the results can only be considered as a first step in a longer process of mapping the ideal onboarding process for international assignees. It should be noted that the Nordic co-operation has now reassessed its onboarding program. New employees are now provided with relocation services by a professional company. Employees now receive assistance with finding a new home, area orientation and settling services. Spouses have also been taken into consideration and are now offered assistance in relation to employment, networking and social support. The reception and welcoming of new employees is now a formal process designed by the Human Resource Department and is carried out in all the councils and locations.

6. Conclusion

SIE face a multitude of issues when relocating, often with vase disruption to their social support, network and career. Researchers have emphasized that an effective onboarding program can enhance performance and job satisfaction and can reduce the stress often associated with international relocation. As a result, the propose of this paper was to investigate how Icelandic SIE experience the onboarding by the Nordic co-operation. In relation to theory, this study contributes to the field of SIE research and helps to further explain the general and work-related onboarding. This study also furthers previous research in the field of International Human Resource Management. On the practical side, the Nordic co-operation is in a better position to improve its expatriate programs and policies. To be more specific, by gaining further understanding of this topic, the Human Resource Manager is in a better position to adjust the training and provide information that is found to be of value for this particular group of employees. A further understanding of successful onboarding could also help retain talent and assist the Nordic co-operation to become an employer of chose.

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