

CAN WOMEN SUCCEED AS GLOBAL MANAGERS?¹

by

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The continued globalization of industries has led to the relentless quest by organizations worldwide for global leaders who can help their companies survive and, perhaps thrive, in this highly competitive environment. Much has been written about the characteristics and competencies needed by global leaders. While these attributes are, in general, non-gender specific, the reality remains that women have often been excluded from appointments and/or promotions to such leadership positions because they appear to lack one of the critical competencies identified for such key roles, namely the possession of a global mindset. Such a competency is often gauged by whether the candidate in question has successfully completed a high-profile international assignment. Even though there are alternative paths to the development of a global orientation, most experts consider international assignments as one of the most effective mechanisms.

Consequently, as long as women remain under-represented in international assignments, they will continue to lack the opportunity to acquire one of the critical competencies required of global leaders. While there has been an increasing usage of women in international assignments over the past two decades, the rate of growth has remained slow. The reasons for such glacial progress can be attributed to one or more of the following beliefs: (a) certain host countries may not be receptive to women expatriates; (b) women are unwilling to undertake such assignments; and/or, (c) women may lack the mental constitution to endure the stresses and strains associated with living and working in some tough foreign environments.

Are Women Willing to Undertake International Assignments?

To investigate more systematically women's attitudes toward international assignments, 80 matched pairs of male and female expatriates were drawn from a larger sample of 514 U.S. expatriates and inpatriates to the U.S. from 50 U.S. multinationals and alumni of a Canadian post-graduate education specializing in training people for international assignments to the Asia-Pacific region. All respondents were either currently on an international assignment or had returned from an international assignment within the past two years. The matched sample was selected from the full sample on the bases of similarities in age, education level, management level, and functional area.

The 160 expatriates were asked about their willingness to undertake international assignments. Statistical analysis showed that more females than males would decline an assignment to the Middle/Near East, while more males than females would reject an assignment to Africa. This finding suggests that while women are willing to work in countries with tough environmental conditions, they may encounter hardships. Women are up to these challenges if these do not prohibit them from undertaking activities and functions they typically engage in at home, such as driving a car and making business calls to clients of the opposite gender. In certain Middle Eastern countries (e.g., Iran and Iraq) where Islamic traditions are rigidly adhered to, women are prohibited from engaging in many of these activities. This accounts for their reluctance to serve in the Middle Eastern countries. For assignments to other geographic regions of the world (i.e., Europe, Asia, Australia, Latin America, and North America, in the case of inpatriates to the U.S.), there was no significant difference between male and female expatriates in their willingness to accept or reject an assignment.

In general, the women expatriates were more prone to decline job offers to work in countries in which they would be accorded a lower social status, or where it was rare for females to participate in

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management. Aside from this finding that women were less receptive to working in countries where there is gross under-representation of women in managerial and professional ranks, there was no difference between males and females in their willingness to serve in countries with harsh living conditions (including regions where there was political instability), and in communities where the expatriate becomes a member of a racial or religious minority.

In addition, female expatriates were more willing to accept an international assignment even if their family objected to the assignment. This is despite the fact that marital status of the male and female respondents in this study was roughly similar; and two, a higher percentage of the partners of female expatriates worked full-time (over three-quarters of the partners of female expatriates were employed full-time as compared to under one-quarter of the partners of male assignees). There are at least two possible explanations for these findings: First, women tend to be more loyal and dedicated to their careers than men, maybe at the expense of their own personal lives. Two, women are more willing to tolerate hardships and undertake risk in the hope that that might help advance their career opportunities.

Are Women Able to Succeed in International Assignments?

There was no significant difference in the rate of success between male and female expatriates, even controlling for country of assignment. The women did experience barriers (both home- and host-country related) to their successful performance abroad, but these were surmountable. These barriers included: (1) the reluctance of corporate headquarters to select females as expatriates, (2) the inability of corporate headquarters to provide adequate support to women in an international assignment (such as mentoring or standing by the women manager's decisions when challenged by male subordinates in male-dominated societies), (3) the inability to break into business networks, including participation in after-hour socializing, and (4) negative stereotyping of women by host country nationals.

How Do Women Cope with the Isolation of Living Abroad?

A common complaint of expatriates about international assignments is the isolation experienced while abroad. Prolonged isolation could lead to dysfunctional behavior, including misguided judgments and decisions, physical and/or emotional problems, thus contributing to failure abroad. The women expatriates were significantly better able to cope with such isolation. A possible explanation for this finding is that since women are still a minority in management and professional positions in the home office, they have had more experience in being excluded from existing networks. Hence they have become more adept at surviving and, perhaps even thriving, under conditions of isolation and loneliness.

Do Men and Women Differ in their Interactions with Local Nationals?

Male and female expatriates were also compared in their management styles and approaches to managing and/or working with local nationals. Women expatriates tended to adopt a listening mode more than their male counterparts, because women believed that this could facilitate interaction with host-country nationals. Similarly, more female respondents were of the opinion that emphasizing harmony and espousing a cooperative mode could help develop better relationships with local nationals.

Management Implications

In light of the growing recognition that possessing a global mindset is a requisite for promotion to top management, it follows that in order to shatter the glass ceiling, more females need to undertake one or two stints of international assignments in their progression toward the top.

The findings of this study show that women were indeed willing to undertake international assignments, including postings to hardship locations, as long as they were not prohibited from engaging in business activities. In fact, they were more prone than men to accept an overseas posting, even when their families objected to the assignment. Two, because of the lower representation of women in managerial/professional ranks, women appeared to be more adept at operating in isolation. This finding that women were better able to cope with the stress and strains associated with the loneliness experienced abroad, coupled with their preferred patterns of interaction with host country nationals, suggest that women are indeed very suited for international assignments. This may be particularly true for postings to high-context and collectivistic societies, as long as women managers are not precluded from performing activities that they could normally engage in at home. After all, the vast majority of the world's population belongs to high-context and collectivistic cultures.

Another attribute that often tends to pose problems in international assignments is the ability of the expatriate to balance the need to cultivate good relationships with the locals, on the one hand, while not estranging headquarters, on the other hand. Trying to strike a delicate balance between these two often-conflicting demands is not easy, and requires well-honed boundary-spanning skills. A source of stress often encountered in international assignments is managing conflicts that arise from work teams comprised of people from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds, and reconciling differences in objectives and patterns of operations between partners in strategic alliances. In other words, conflict-mediating stress. Females appear better able to cope with conflict-mediating stress than males.

While women and men do not differ in their performance abroad, women appear to possess certain competencies that render them particularly suitable for overcoming international barriers. In short, contrary to popular opinion, it appears that women are indeed able to succeed in international assignments. In fact, certain so-called feminine characteristics and traits might render them particularly suitable for relocations to particular countries. This could lead to a win-win situation wherein women can acquire the requisite global orientation to facilitate their aspirations to the senior ranks of management, and, at the same time, their companies can benefit from the distinct attributes and attitude that women often bring to the position.