

# Teachers and their international relocation: The effect of self-efficacy and flexibility on adjustment and outcome variables

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*In this study the adjustment process in a designated group of expatriates, (teachers), who have severed ties with their home country and employer is investigated. Based on existing literature, the value of self-efficacy and flexibility on the adjustment process was explored. It was hypothesised that adjustment would result in reduced turnover intention, increased life satisfaction, and higher job satisfaction. Results revealed the significance of self-efficacy but failed to reveal a significant relationship between flexibility and adjustment. As a result of this study, there are some clear implications for individuals and organisations involved in the expatriation process. From a personal point of view, those who score high on scales which measure self-efficacy would appear to be the ones most likely to find success within the international relocation process. From an organisational perspective, the accurate measurement of self-efficacy may provide valuable information to the employer regarding those applicants that have the greatest probability of adjustment. Given that this study looked exclusively at educators in its sampling, the implications for the staff of faculties of education, who are seeing increasing numbers of their graduates accept postings in foreign jurisdictions, are significant.*

Expatriate, adjustment, relocation, self efficacy, flexibility

## **BACKGROUND**

There has been increasing interest in the issue of expatriate adjustment over the recent past (Luthans and Farner, 2002; Wang, 2002). This is due primarily to the incremental importance of international trading, cross-national manufacturing and the emergence of a global economy (New York Times, 2002), all resulting in a dramatic increase in the expatriation of employees (Dodd, 2003; Harzing, 1995). This is especially profound within education where ever increasing numbers of foreign countries are each year seeking out the services of university trained teachers, (particularly those trained in English speaking countries), in perhaps a perceived effort to give their young citizens the necessary skills required to compete effectively in this newly emerging borderless economy (Brown, 2004; Richardson and Richardson, 2002-2005). With respect to this view, although there can be little doubt that employment opportunities now know no national boundaries, conversely, current research in the field reports a relatively high failure rate within these proliferate expatriate assignments (Black, 1988; Black and Gregersen, 1999; Down, 1978; Tung, 1981), with education most likely being no exception to this general rule, although there has been very little published research devoted exclusively to the study of educators serving in foreign destinations.

Nevertheless, for the employee in general, across all disciplines, it is evident that adjustment following foreign relocation is fraught with tremendous amounts of anxiety, stress, and pitfalls (Harvey, 1983). Although the term 'adjustment' is used frequently in the literature (Adler, 1991; Black, Gregersen, and Mendenhall, 1992), there does not appear to be a consistent or universal definition of it. However, with this point being conceded, when it comes to measuring cross-cultural adjustment, the criterion of whether or not an individual returns prematurely from his or her overseas assignment is the one most frequently applied (Baker and Ivancevich, 1971; Desatnick and Bennett, 1978; Lanier, 1979; Misa and Fabricatore, 1979; Tung, 1988). By utilising this particular perspective, studies overwhelmingly indicate that between 30 per cent and 50 per cent of all expatriate employees ultimately terminate their employment before their contract officially expires, with rates ranging from 25 per cent to 40 per cent when associated with a developed country, to as high as 70 per cent when associated with a developing country (Buckley and Brooke, 1992; Shay and Tracey, 1997). However, premature termination of contract may not be the only reliable indicator of overall adjustment. For example, several other studies have tried to measure the effectiveness of expatriate employees in their overseas assignments and have discovered that a statistically significant number, although not returning to their countries of origin prematurely, are nonetheless viewed as being completely ineffective in their postings, with their overall assignments being considered ultimately as failures (Black and Gregersen, 1991; Copeland and Louis, 1985; Naumann, 1993).

The authors of *Global Assignments, Successfully Expatriating and Repatriating International Managers* (Black et al., 1992), devote an entire chapter to the issue of cross-cultural adjustment. Their discussion centers on the issue of 'culture shock.' This theme too was taken up by Oberg (1960), where he describes a process whereby a new culture is rejected in favour of a very positive review of, and desire for the familiar. Similarly, Hofstede (1983; 1980) reviews some of the significant differences in work-related values between cultures and their effect on global assignments. In this work, the idea of 'adjustment' remains broken into a number of different factors and subsequent measures. As might be expected, much of this early research in the field focuses on aspects of living, such as food, transportation systems, and daily customs. However, more recently, adjustment is filtered through a more complex paradigm, being defined and described by some as consisting of three very distinct but related factors (Black et al., 1992); adjustment to the job, adjustment to interacting with host-country nationals, and finally, adjustment to the general non-work environment.

Other research, with respect to adjustment, has further subdivided it into two main temporal sections. The first is called "anticipatory adjustment" (Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou, 1991) and refers to the expectations that the individual forms about the new culture and assignment. These expectations can be based on factual information such as knowledge acquired through reading and training, or through personal beliefs and wishes. It is generally conceived that the more accurate the expectational set, the smoother the adjustment will be. The second temporal section proposed by Black et al. (1991) is referred to as the 'post-arrival' or 'in-country factor' adjustment. Of importance here is the process that takes place when the expatriate actually arrives in the new country, again, particularly as it relates to the individual and his or her expectations. In essence, it is believed that the degree to which expectations are confirmed or disconfirmed, greatly impacts on adjustment. Louis (1980) addressed this issue for 'newcomers' in general, and described it as the difference between expectations and reality. Her theory suggested that negative surprises detracted from successful socialisation or adjustment. Both of these temporal sections are further subdivided into individual factors, job factors, organisational factors, and non-work factors.

What is evident in the literature is that there are numerous definitions and subsequent measures for the construct of 'adjustment.' It is important, therefore, to define the term in a way that incorporates many of the definitions previously used and studied, while at the same time lending

itself favourably to the specific purposes of this particular study. The following then is the specific definition of 'adjustment' utilised for this study: **Adjustment is the person's ability to function effectively, personally and vocationally, in the new environment.**

With very little exception, the majority of published research within this general domain has focused on individuals moving overseas for work with a parent company or on those who have been formally recruited by a home country organisation for an overseas assignment (for example, the Peace Corps or CIDA here in North America). The greatest percentage of this research would seem to involve primarily North Americans moving abroad to represent a multi-national parent company. The literature, then, does not adequately address the issue of how a specific sub-group, (namely teachers who resign from their current employment to accept overseas jobs), adjust to their new environments. Thus, this research is an attempt to address this quite apparent void.

### INTRODUCTION TO PRESENT STUDY

The present study has been designed to measure adjustment in individuals who have willingly left employment in their home country to seek out opportunities within the educational sector in a foreign jurisdiction. Relying on the proposed definition of adjustment cited directly above, it will be necessary to measure personal attributes and examine their relationship to certain outcomes associated with subjects who have adjusted effectively to their new environment. Some literature (for example, Sayegh and Lasry, 1993) suggests that proper adjustment allows the individual to function optimally in the new environment. Reciprocally, successful adjustment should result in a general sense of well-being in both the world of work and in the private life of the individual.

Although flexibility and self-efficacy have long been known to play a significant role in education in general (Miller, 1997; Soodak and Podell, 1993; Woolfolk and Hoy, 1990; Zimmerman, 2000), and in the chemistry of the truly exceptional educator in particular (Allinder, 1994; Dewar, 2002; King and Peart, 1992; King, Warren, and Peart, 1988; Roy, 1987), their influence within the expatriate adjustment dynamic have also not gone unnoticed. For example, psychological flexibility and willingness to engage in unfamiliar activities have been found to be relevant to adjustment in expatriates (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985). Trying new foods and engaging in different hobbies or sporting activities is often an expatriate necessity because the familiar is inaccessible. Hence, an attitude of open-mindedness would appear to play a significant role in moderating the stress sometimes associated with culture shock. Likewise, some authors (Black et al., 1992), quoting research by Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) and Hawes and Kealey (1981), imply that expatriates (individuals, spouses, and families) who are generally willing to make accommodations with respect to dealing with unfamiliar or different experiences are also the ones most likely to make the smoothest of transitions. Similarly, Caligiuri and Jacobs (1993) and Tung (1981) found that individuals who are open to new cultures, able to get along with people of different backgrounds, and capable of being effective in a variety of situations, ultimately, have the capacity to adjust much better. Tung (1981) formally referred to this capacity, or lack of it, as general psychological flexibility. In her study, she suggested that individuals with greater flexibility will adapt better to both work and non-work situations. Pronounced levels of flexibility, it is postulated, also serves to minimise culture shock in that individuals who possess this characteristic will experience more ease in behaving and thinking in new ways. It is also expected that flexible individuals will demonstrate less ethnocentricity and would demonstrate greater tolerance for ambiguity. Finally, Gentile, Halperin, and Cochran (1993) have also found flexibility to correlate in a significant manner with adjustment.

With direct reference to self-efficacy, Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) found that self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1977), (the belief that one can successfully perform a behaviour and the subsequent willingness to persevere in the face of adversity), is related to and functions as a predictor of adjustment. More specifically, it would appear that expatriates who are high in self-

efficacy are also the ones who are persistent in learning and imitating the appropriate behaviours of the host country, which then sets in motion a process that leads directly to adjustment. Consequently, these individuals are less likely to become discouraged when compared to those with low self-efficacy (Black et al., 1991). Black et al. (1992) and Black and Mendenhall (1990) addressed the issue of expatriate adjustment through the application of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). This theory states that learning takes place through the use of four central elements: attention, retention, reproduction, and incentives. One of the main arguments of this theory is that gradual modelling of behaviour is more effective than modelling of only the final or target behaviour. Individuals with high self-esteem (Dowling and Schuler, 1990) and high self-efficacy are seen to persist in attempting to learn new behaviours when compared to those with low self-esteem and low self-efficacy. It is surmised that these same individuals will be more willing to change mental and behavioural patterns and, consequently, adjust successfully to their new environment.

In summary, in reviewing the literature, flexibility and self-efficacy would appear to assist, in a substantial way, expatriates in the overall adjustment process. Improved adjustment, in turn, should result in higher life satisfaction, greater job satisfaction, and decreased turnover intention. The following then, are the hypotheses investigated within the confines of this particular study.

The literature cited above has clearly demonstrated the importance of self-efficacy in the adjustment process of expatriates. Therefore, the first hypothesis suggests that **individuals with high self-efficacy will be better adjusted.**

Previous research has demonstrated that psychological flexibility leads to better adjustment in expatriates. Thus, the second hypothesis states that **individuals with more flexibility will be better adjusted.**

Studies have clearly demonstrated that adjusted individuals grow to not only enjoy their foreign assignments, thereby completing their overseas contracts, but are also more productive in the process. The third hypothesis then, suggests that **adjustment will predict job satisfaction.** Quite naturally, following on this, a fourth hypothesis states that **adjustment will predict turnover intention.**

The fifth hypothesis is predicated on the perceived permeability between life and work stress (Frone, Russell, and Cooper, 1992). In the context of the present study, this may play an even more significant role due to the fact that employees have, in most instances, left a job in their home country to join a new employer in their new country. This suggests that work and non-work adjustment would result in differing levels of well-being and life satisfaction. Thus, Hypothesis 5 states that **adjustment will predict overall life satisfaction.**

The final and sixth hypothesis is based on the idea that individual differences will predict adjustment and that adjustment, in turn, will predict certain outcomes. Adjustment is believed to act as a mediator between the two predictor variables and the three outcome variables. Hence, Hypothesis 6 states that **adjustment will mediate the relationship between the antecedent and outcome variables.**

## METHOD

### Procedure

Permission was sought and granted by the Ministry of Education and the Education Department of a small island Caribbean state, to survey all teachers employed by the host government in the public school system. In order to collect all information before expatriate employees would formalise their requests to renew or terminate their contracts in the following year, all data were

collected over a two week period in late fall. The questionnaires were distributed and collected by the authors directly. In total, 196 questionnaires were distributed. Of these, an effective sample of 184 usable and complete surveys were obtained for a return rate of 94 per cent.

## Participants

The **sample** consisted of 56 expatriates from North America and the United Kingdom, and 128 teachers from other Caribbean countries. The mean age for the expatriates was the 40-49 year-old group. There were 56 males and 126 females with two missing responses. In order to ensure homogeneity of working conditions, the total sample consisted of only those individuals who spent more than 50 per cent of their working time in a teaching capacity which excluded most school administrators and support staff.

## Measures

**Self-Efficacy** was measured with a series of 11 items, four of which were based on the work of Major and Kozlowski (1990) while the others were developed specifically for this study. A sample item is 'I have all the requisite skills and knowledge to do my job here.'

**Flexibility** was measured by a shortened version of the flexibility scale from the California Psychological Inventory (Gough, 1987). This test has a long history of use as a measure of normal personality traits. Highly flexible individuals are described as liking change and variety, and being easily bored by routine life (CPI Manual, 1987). A sample item is 'I think I am stricter about right and wrong than most people.'

**Adjustment** was measured with a scale developed for this project. It initially consisted of 20 items. These items were generated following interviews for a realistic job preview exercise (von Kirchenheim, 1992). A sample item is 'Although I do not necessarily agree with the politics, I accept the way things are done here.'

**Job satisfaction** was measured with a five-item scale similar to that used by Ostroff and Kozlowski (1992). A sample item is 'I am very dissatisfied with this job,' (reverse scored).

**Turnover intention** was based on a four-item scale. Three of the items were based on the scale used in the Ostroff and Kozlowski (1992) study. The other item addressed whether expatriate employees intended to renew their contract or terminate their employment with the government. A sample item from the scale is, 'In general, I intend to stay in this job for as long as possible.'

**Life satisfaction** was measured with the five item Satisfaction with Life Scale developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985). This scale was designed to measure global life satisfaction (Pavot and Diener, 1993). An item from this scale is 'I am satisfied with my life.'

## RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, alpha coefficients, and intercorrelations among variables are presented in Table 1. The reliabilities for the scales were all acceptable. It should be noted that both the self-efficacy and adjustment scales required some modification before being included in the final analyses of this study as reliabilities were below acceptable levels (coefficient  $\alpha < 0.60$ ). Consequently, exploratory principal components factor analyses with a varimax rotation of factors were performed, and the two scales shortened to bring the respective reliability to acceptable levels. As shown in Table 1, interestingly, the relationship between self-efficacy and flexibility is significant but negative ( $r = -0.17, p < 0.05$ ).

Results support the first hypothesis, stating that self-efficacy would lead to higher levels of adjustment ( $r = 0.27, p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that the greater one's sense of self-efficacy, the better one is likely to adjust.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix**

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	1	2	3	4	5	6
Eff	31.25	3.25	(0.67)					
Flex	25.23	4.97	-0.17*	(0.77)				
Adjust	39.08	5.91	0.27*	-0.09	(0.74)			
Life Sat	16.33	4.06	0.19*	-0.07	0.36*	(0.73)		
Job	18.24	4.36	0.26*	-0.04	0.53*	0.57*	(0.84)	
Turn	9.02	4.08	-0.22*	0.05	-0.53*	-0.36*	-0.70*	(0.82)

Note: \* denotes all correlations that are significant at  $p < 0.05$ . Correlations with values  $\Rightarrow 0.25$  are significant at  $p > 0.001$ . Coefficient alphas are reported in the diagonals, in parentheses. No alpha is available for previous Caribbean experience as this was not a scale.

No support was found for the second hypothesis, which predicted that individuals possessing more flexibility would be better adjusted ( $r = -0.09$ ,  $p = 0.208$ ). In fact, other than the negative relationship described above, flexibility did not correlate significantly with any of the other measures. A *post hoc* analysis was conducted to determine if there might be an interaction between flexibility and self-efficacy, but no significant effect was found.

The next set of hypotheses dealt with the outcomes of positive adjustment. Specifically, the third hypothesis stated that adjustment would be associated with increased job satisfaction. This hypothesis was supported ( $r = 0.53$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The fourth hypothesis, stating that adjustment would negatively correlate with turnover intentions was also supported ( $r = -0.36$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, the fifth hypothesis was supported, suggesting that overall life satisfaction would be associated with adjustment ( $r = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

As depicted in Table 2, the next step was to use hierarchical multiple regression analysis (Cohen and Cohen, 1983) to test the overall model (Hypothesis 6), that adjustment would act as a mediator. As some significant relationship between the variables must exist in order to fit the proposed model, only those factors meeting the precondition of correlating at a significant level were retained at this step. This effectively eliminated flexibility from the equation.

**Table 2. Hierarchical regression**

Variables	Beta	R2	change in R2	F	p
<b>Job Satisfaction</b>					
Step 1: Self -Eff	0.257	0.066		12.96	0.0004
Step 2: Adjust.	0.499	0.297	0.231	59.62	0.0000
<b>Life Satisfaction</b>					
Step 1: Self -Eff	0.241	0.037		7.04	0.0087
Step 2: Adjust.	0.334	0.14	0.103	21.75	0.0000
<b>Turnover Intention</b>					
Step 1: Self -Eff	-0.221	0.05		9.35	0.0026
Step 2: Adjust.	-0.318	0.14	0.09	19.73	0.0000

Consequently, self-efficacy was entered at step 1, followed by adjustment at step 2. Separate regressions were performed for each of the three dependent variables; well-being, job satisfaction and turnover intention. Results, as presented in Table 2, indicate that significant effects were found for self-efficacy contributing to adjustment. Adjustment in turn, resulted in higher life satisfaction, increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover intention. In order to test for full mediation, however, a second step is required. In this analysis, the factors are entered into the equation in reverse order. Evidence of full mediation is provided if the predictive factors at step two now do not significantly add to the variance explained by adjustment. As can be seen in Table 3, for each of the dependent variables there is significant change at step 1 when adjustment is entered into the equation. However, the change at step 2 is not significant. Therefore, these results support the mediating role of adjustment.

**Table 3. Hierarchical regression (reverse order)**

Variables	Beta	R2	change in R2	F	p
<b>Job Satisfaction</b>					
Step 1: Self -Eff	0.532	0.283		72.13	0.0000
Step 2: Adjust.	0.122	0.297	0.014	3.60	0.059
<b>Life Satisfaction</b>					
Step 1: Self -Eff	0.361	0.131		27.37	0.0000
Step 2: Adjust.	0.102	0.141	0.009	2.06	0.153
<b>Turnover Intention</b>					
Step 1: Self -Eff	-0.354	0.125		26.10	0.0000
Step 2: Adjust.	-0.135	0.142	0.017	3.58	0.060

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the adjustment process in a designated group of expatriates who have severed ties with their home country and employer. Based on existing literature, the value of self-efficacy and flexibility on the adjustment process was investigated. It was hypothesised that adjustment would result in reduced turnover intention, increased life satisfaction, and higher job satisfaction. Results revealed the significance of self-efficacy but failed to reveal a significant relationship between flexibility and adjustment.

A previous finding with employees of multi-national companies, which was replicated with this population of teachers, was the importance of self-efficacy in successful international assignments. A strong relationship was evidenced between self-efficacy and adjustment, as well as the three outcome variables. This suggests that measuring and utilising self-efficacy could significantly increase the success rate of international placements.

Without question, a surprising finding was that flexibility was without profound influence. Although this characteristic has been found to be predictive in other studies (Gentile et al., 1993; Tung, 1981), not so in this one. One very plausible explanation for this is that the measure used in this particular study was not appropriate for determining the type of flexibility required in this specific international setting. Restated, the Caribbean country studied, including its Education Department, is world renown for adhering to a very rigid set of standards which are overwhelmingly Christian based. Hence, deviation from the standard is very much discouraged. Consequently, within this particular international paradigm, it just may be that people, who are inflexible and less tolerant by nature, are better able to adjust to both their work and non-work environments. At minimum, this may be an interesting area for further study. Throughout the study, attempts were made to determine if flexibility may have an indirect role, such as serving as a conduit for self-efficacy, however, no substantial support was found for this through exploratory analysis. Inflexibility, on the other hand, may be of value and assist in the adjustment process within this particular international setting. This would fit with the Attraction-Selection-Attrition model developed by Schneider (1987) and recently reviewed (Schneider, Goldstein, and Smith, 1995). Again, further research is required to determine fully if the flexibility-inflexibility continuum is another dimension to consider within the international relocation process.

### Limitations of Present Research

Clearly this study was conducted on a very homogeneous population. The subjects had relatively the same education, identical job descriptions, worked under very similar conditions, and lived in the same non-work environment. Consequently, it is difficult to make generalisations to other groups. It would be valuable to conduct similar studies not only with other organisational groups, but also in different geographical settings. Similarly, a design that does not rely solely on self-report would add considerably to the validity of the findings. This study also does not specifically measure whether or not expatriates were successful in their jobs as educators. It would also have

been helpful to have controlled for job tenure. As well, although acceptable for the purposes of this study, the reliability of the self-efficacy scale was somewhat low. The development of a more reliable measure, and the determination of whether self-efficacy is a one-dimensional or multidimensional factor for this population, would make a valuable contribution to future research endeavours.

Finally, although we noted, empirically, some subtle differences in the responses from foreign nationals from North America, the United Kingdom, and other countries in the Caribbean, we were prevented from formally/officially sorting and analysing these data in this particular way due to constraints placed on the survey design and analysis by the host country. As alluded to earlier, in our view, this might have some profound influence, particularly in getting a more accurate measurement within the flexibility domain, as many educators of Caribbean extraction come from countries which share a very similar heritage/tradition. As a result, future research will clearly match country of origin with specific response, which will, we believe, more significantly highlight the role played by both self-efficacy and flexibility in the adjustment experiences of expatriate teachers.

### Practical Implications

Despite its limitations, as a result of this study, there are some clear implications for individuals and organisations involved in the expatriation process. Of paramount importance, would appear to be the issue of self-efficacy. From a personal point of view, those who score high on scales which measure self-efficacy would appear to be the ones most likely to find success within the international relocation process. From an organisational perspective, the accurate measurement of self-efficacy may provide valuable information to the employer regarding those applicants that have the greatest probability of adjustment. As has been previously demonstrated, maladjustment prevents even the most technically or professionally qualified employees from working to their potential.

When applicants are equally qualified, employers may be well-advised to evaluate and select those applicants demonstrating higher levels of self-efficacy. Moreover, organisations that recruit large numbers of expatriates or foreign employees to key positions may want to establish training programs to increase self-efficacy among their recruits. Given that this study looked exclusively at educators in its sampling, the implications for faculties of education, who are seeing increasing numbers of their graduates accept postings in foreign jurisdictions, are significant.

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