Organisational learning through international assignment in Japanese overseas companies

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Organisational Learning through International Assignment in Japanese Overseas Companies*

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ABSTRACT

Existing literature on expatriate managers tends to focus on their adjustment from the point of view of individual well-being. This paper, in pointing out that international assignments are an opportunity to internationalise the company through a learning process, has a different emphasis. Japanese companies tend to employ many Japanese expatriate managers in overseas locations. The development of cross-cultural adaptation among expatriate Japanese managers in two retail subsidiary companies in Hong Kong was studied. In both companies, the expatriates learned reactively rather than proactively, involving either zero or single-loop organisational learning ensued for the parent company. The reactive learning approach stemmed from expatriates perceiving their career prospects related more to events back at the parent company than to the success or failure of the local subsidiary, and that it might be harmful to their career if they internationalise themselves during the overseas assignment.

Key words: Japan, organisational learning, international assignment, cross-cultural adaptation, multinational companies.
INTRODUCTION

The concept of organisational learning in which organisations must "learn" to remain competitive has been receiving considerable attention among human resource management academics and managers. The general drift of practitioner and academic opinion has been that when it comes to designing optimal forms of organisational learning, human resources of organisation become one of the crucial elements. In this respect, it appears that Japanese companies can throw light on this relationship because they are more successful in activating Japanese for organisational learning as Japanese employees tend to be able to "act out the learning spirit for the corporate good" (Holden, 1990: 242).

However, few studies have been done on how Japanese managers acquire organisational learning when they are assigned to work overseas. Although interest in international human resource management (IHRM) has seen a rapid growth which emerges from a wide range of perspectives, most of the existing IHRM studies are concerned with expatriate studies. They include acculturation (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985, 1986), satisfaction with the expatriation and repatriation processes (Black, Gregersen and Mendenhall, 1992), work role transition from working in parent country to host country (Nicholson, 1984), the problems of adjustment to foreign cultures (Black, 1990; Black and Gregersen, 1991; Black and Stephens, 1989; Brewster, 1993), and subsequently the nature of adjustment and commitment to the parent company after repatriation (Forster, 1994; Gregersen and Black, 1990). A critical look at this literature reveals that the central theme reflects a strong socio-psychological and welfare concern related to the adjustment of expatriate managers. Nevertheless, an important theme on whether how expatriate managers learn and develop cross-cultural sensitivity in the international assignment has been largely overlooked in the existing studies.

The theme of learning in IHRM studies is not so developed as many scholars have called for a more robust exposition and further research in learning possesses in organisations and in an international context (Forster, 1992; Kamoche, 1997). The purpose of this study is to investigate the issues of organisational learning through international assignment by Japanese overseas retail companies in Hong Kong. It attempts to answer the following
research questions:
* What are the circumstances in which cross-cultural sensitivity learning fails to take place among Japanese expatriate managers through international assignment?
* What are the practical implications for designing international assignments in Japanese MNCs?

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Two sets of literature - international management and organisational learning - are reviewed. The review of international management literature shows that the process of internationalising managers involves the development of managers to be cross-culturally sensitive and adaptable. Expatriate managers need to go beyond local context and understand world business environment when they work with overseas clients and employees. In brief, they need to have cross-cultural and cultural adaptation skills to adjust to the needs of people from other cultures so as to learn from partners worldwide for enhancing organisational capability, and gaining as much knowledge from each interaction. Such expatriates' skills can help the MNC to transmit knowledge quickly and effectively throughout the worldwide network of operations (Sparrow and Hiltrop, 1994; Hendry, 1994; Adler and Bartholomew, 1992).

It is suggested that a company seeking international expansion should appreciate that its accumulated organisational learning is embedded in its stock of human capital. Thus, the company should develop systems which enable it to transfer knowledge around the organisation as well as create new knowledge and skills (Welch and Welch, 1994). One of the most important ways to internationalise managers is by international assignment (Sparrow and Hiltrop, 1994). Through international assignment, expatriate managers can acquire organisational learning from the overseas subsidiary which can ultimately be transferred to the parent company. In order to achieve this, it is essential for expatriates to acquire learning in cross-cultural sensitivity and adaptation which helps MNCs move away from the ethnocentric management approach in the internationalisation process (Adler and Ghadar, 1990). Therefore, understanding and managing cultural differences becomes one of
the essential skills for cross-cultural interaction which takes place both within and between
the MNCs and its external environment.

One of the important items for organisation learning in cross-cultural sensitivity is the
staff's capacity to be adaptable (Senge, 1990). This suggests that expatriates need to open up
and accept a variety of viewpoints, including those of the local employees. This individual
learning to view things from the local employees' point of view derives from the need that
individual expatriate managers should be pro-active and user-driven, rather than from the
requirement of the parent company which should be reactive or passive. That is, individual
expatriate managers need to have their own knowledge acquisition initiatives to understand
the needs of local employees rather than from the requirement of the parent company. This
explains how the process of internationalising managers could lead to organisational learning
in overseas subsidiary.

A comprehensive review of another set of literature shows that the most obvious point
emerging from organisational learning is a tag applied to a divergent set of organisational
phenomena which have little in common other than that they could be loosely described as
'change for the better'. In order to develop a meaningful definition of organisational
learning, some of the most quoted authorities such as Bateson's (1973), Argyris and Schon
(1974; 1978), and Hawkins (1991, 1994) are reviewed. Based on Bateson's (1973) theory,
there are four levels of individual learning - zero learning, learning level I, learning level II,
and learning level III. In the zero learning, learners only receive information but do not
enact any forms of change. Although the information may lead to learning, it is not
learning in itself. It indicates that at organisational level, there is no linkage between
individuals' mental models and shared mental models.

Central to Argyris and Schon's theory are the concepts of single- and double-loop
learning. Single-loop learning is defined as 'instrumental learning that changes strategies
of action or assumptions underlying strategies in ways that leave the values of a theory of
action unchanged. An example given is quality control inspectors who identify a defective
product, convey the information to production engineers, who modify production
procedures to eliminate the defect. Such feedback loops do not challenge basic system
assumptions and lead to minor incremental change. Double-loop learning, by contrast, is ‘learning that results in a change in the values of theory-in-use, as well as in its strategies and assumptions.’ In double-loop learning the underlying system assumptions are challenged and modified. It is argued that to create a learning organisation is to expose the defensive routines in managerial thinking so that they can be recognised and owned.

Learning takes place when individuals learn at level I which involves skill learning. Single-loop organisational learning is achieved when actions are adjusted to get the desired outcome. Individuals’ learning is adaptive when they adjust their actions to increase the possibility of achieving the organisational goal, while their desired outcome remains the same. This contributes to increase the firm’s knowledge and competency base without altering present policies, objectives, mental maps, and basic activities. In other words, learning at this level is reactive rather than proactive (Argyris, 1992).

Learning level II or double-loop organisational learning involves strategic learning in which new meanings and actions are transformed from mental maps. Individuals change their views of the nature of business, business environment, and their place in the organisation. They see and make sense of things in a totally different ways by understanding why their prior meaning-making or goal-seeking systems were inadequate and led to incongruities and omissions. This leads to organisational learning by changing the firm’s knowledge and competency base through reframing problems, developing new shared paradigms, policies and objectives. In this way, double-loop learning is proactive rather than reactive. It takes place when solutions are actually produced since organisations exist “to accomplish intended consequences” (Argyris, 1992).

In brief, in international assignment, learning among expatriates may not take place when problems are discovered or solutions invented. Instead, learning takes place when solutions are actually produced by accumulating new ideas, new methods of problem solving and acquired experience. The value of know-how and experience gained from utilising human resources in international management is realisable when directed towards improving the company’s effectiveness. However, the current trend of international assignment in Japanese MNCs raise doubts about the extent to which this actually takes
place. In this research, the circumstances in which learning fails to take place and the practical implications for designing international assignments are examined.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

The research to be reported here concerns organisational learning in cross-cultural adaptability by the Japanese expatriate managers in two Japanese department store companies - Morioka and Okadaya - in Hong Kong. The profile of the case companies is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Profile of Two Japanese Department Store Companies (as of mid-1997)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Morioka</th>
<th>Okadaya</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year of Establishment</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of First Store Opened</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Active Operation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>100% Japanese</td>
<td>100% Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Store Outlets</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Employees</td>
<td>2,700</td>
<td>1,300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: compiled by the author based on the company reports.
Morioka was a wholly-owned Japanese department store established in 1974. It remained dormant until its first store opened in 1984. The parent company of Morioka moved its headquarters from Japan to Hong Kong in 1989 and relocated to Shanghai, China in July 1996. The company had opened a total of 10 store outlets in Hong Kong and Macao, and employed a total of 2,700 employees in Hong Kong by mid-1997. In November 1997, the company declared insolvency. Okadaya was also a wholly-owned Japanese department store established in 1986. It operated five store outlets in Hong Kong, employing 1,300 local employees. The company had opened one more new store since the interviews were conducted in mid-1997. It maintains as one of the most profitable department stores even under the current economic crisis in Asia.

The data about organisational learning by the Japanese expatriate managers in Morioka and Okadaya was researched through intensive interviews of 40 Japanese expatriate managers - 25 from Morioka and 15 from Okadaya - who had worked with the company for at least one year. It takes time for the expatriates to adapt to the host environment. At the beginning of their assignment, the expatriates often encounter a “slow learning curve” which may naturally adversely affect their learning ability. Thus, only those expatriate managers who have stayed in Hong Kong for at least a year were chosen for interviews.

The instrument used in the in-depth interviews was a semi-structured, open-ended interview schedule. A qualitative method allowed flexibility in the research process and the formulation of new hypotheses as the research progressed (Allison, 1993; Cassell and Symon, 1985).

All the Japanese interviewees were regarded as participants in the research, exploring different levels of meaning and actively shaping the course of the interview (King, 1995; May, 1993; O’Sullivan et al., 1995). They represented a range of age, sex and professional status. Each interview lasted between an hour and an hour-and-a-half. Descriptive narration (Miles and Huberman, 1994) was selected as the most appropriate analytical method in order to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. Because of the relatively small number of interviewees and companies interviewed, the results could not be considered as representative of Japanese expatriates in general. However, conclusions might be generated
from the particular which may or may not be applicable to general patterns or trends (Allison, 1993; King, 1995; May, 1993; O’Sullivan et al., 1995).

LEARNING IN CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION

Almost all Japanese respondents said that they were aware of the cultural differences between Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese especially in the workplace. However, a majority (35 out of 40 or 87.5 percent) of the respondents said that they did not intend to enact any form of change in their work attitude, behaviour and practice. For example, Japanese expatriates of Morioka did not change their practice of providing spiritual training to local staff like their Japanese counterparts even some local staff complained that they could not accept such type of training related to the company chairman’s religion.

All the remaining five respondents who claimed they learnt cross-cultural adaptation said that it was mainly out of their own initiatives rather than the company’s requirement. Furthermore, they tended to be involved in single-loop skill learning. For instance, the five Japanese respondents learnt spoken Cantonese for communicating with local employees.

The above evidence shows that the Japanese expatriate managers of both companies are reactive rather than proactive to cross-cultural sensitivity and adaptation. They merely detect and rectify certain management problems occurred by adjusting reactively to them. However, they do little to address the underlying values by changing their Japanese style management attitudes and behaviour when they manage local staff in the Hong Kong context. As a whole, the Japanese expatriates managers can only achieve a level 1 single-loop learning, and in most cases, the organisations failed to achieve any organisational learning (zero learning in Bateson’s term).
CIRCUMSTANCES FOR UNREALISED SCOPE FOR LEARNING IN CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION

One of the important rationale for assigning managers to work overseas is to make them learn cross-cultural adaptability and sensitivity as “an international assignment represents an opportunity for managers to acquire knowledge from international assignments” (Kamoche, 1997: 217). However, evidence from the above incidents shows that the Japanese expatriates of the two Japanese retail companies in Hong Kong have acquired limited cross-cultural adaptation learning in international assignment. Based on the data derived in the second part of the interviews, the reasons for and factors leading to the limited cross-cultural adaptability and sensitivity learning achieved by the Japanese expatriates in the two Japanese case companies are explained below.

Selection for Overseas Assignment

The Japanese managers explained that it had long been a debate as to what sort of quality the parent company was after - technical competence or ability of cross-cultural adaptation and sensitivity - when they selected managers for overseas assignment. There were no clear guidelines in the personnel department of the parent company in Japan. However, in most cases of selecting managers for international assignment, the primary consideration of the parent company of both Morioka and Okadaya was to get the job done based on technical competence, rather than the ability of cross-cultural adaptation and sensitivity. Therefore, international assignment was neither for international career development nor international organisational development. Consequently, in evaluating employees’ lifelong career performance in the parent company, international experience was treated as an hindrance to potential career advancement.

Pre-departure Training

A majority of (37 out of 40) Japanese expatriate interviewees explained that they had not received any pre-departure international training. Those who had received pre-departure training programme said that the training did not emphasise cross-cultural sensitivity and language training, but on teaching technical and administrative skills for getting the jobs done with minimal fuss. This was consistent with the existing findings that training courses for
preparing Japanese to become international managers were unsatisfactory because they were not internationally oriented, and placed less emphasis on language and cross-cultural relational skills (Marceau, 1989; Tung, 1990).

**Performance Appraisal**

Another factor leading to the limited cross-cultural adaptability and sensitivity learning achieved by the Japanese expatriates is related to their unwillingness to learn as a result of the performance appraisal system used in the parent company in Japan. First of all, many Japanese expatriates explained that due to the fear of “out-of-sight and out-of-mind”, they understood that even the best evaluations in the overseas assignment could rarely lead to a significant career advancement. They worried that they would be appraised as somewhat inconsequential to the domestic mainstream in the worst case. Therefore, many Japanese managers interviewed said that during their Hong Kong assignment, they did not intend to make any cross-cultural adjustment to work more on an individual basis and independently which were considered as corrupting and contaminating the organisational culture of the parent company. They emphasised that they would have a more favourable evaluation by senior staff in the headquarters by not acquiring any the cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation.

Since Japanese expatriates realised that their fortunes and prospects were not tied to their performance in the overseas subsidiaries but to the parent company, they looked toward the parent company for learning. Thus, they tended to stick to the Japanese management and work practices which made them less likely to learn cross-cultural sensitivity and adaptability skills to adjust to local environment.

**Corporate Culture and Control**

Corporate culture is one of an important elements of human resource management practices. The degree of how internationalised the expatriate managers depends on “the states of mind and mindsets than with behaviours” (Laurent, 1986). In contrast to the purpose of internationalising managers through international assignment, the parent company intended to use Japanese expatriates for international management control. The management at the parent company put expatriates in key positions in overseas companies and rewarded
them according to the parent company standard. Therefore, the Japanese expatriates became less likely to acquire individual learning at a higher level, not to mention that they could transform what they learnt from the overseas companies into actions by changing the existing policies or systems. Since the Japanese expatriates of the two companies studied adopted such ethnocentric management approach, the Japanese expatriates acquired limited cross-cultural learning in their Hong Kong assignment.

**Urgent staffing requirement**

During the rapid expansion period of the early 1990s, Morioka was confronted with the demand of a large number of Japanese staff for international assignment. As the size of the parent company was relatively small, it had exhausted all eligible managers for overseas assignment, and had to send young Japanese at the supervisory level overseas. That is, the parent company placed short-term job filling as priorities over the concern for long-term development and socialisation of individuals. Furthermore, pre-departure training was not provided because of lack of time. Therefore, it explains why the Japanese expatriates of Morioka had limited cross-cultural learning.

**IMPLICATIONS**

New information originates at the individual level. The impetus for the learning process is that new information is associated with organisational actions which originates at the individual level. However, the process of organisational learning involves more than cumulative learning of individuals although individuals are the agents of organisational learning. In order to be transformed into organisational learning, it implies that individual learning by the Japanese expatriates needs to be integrated into a collective learning base or organisational memory which can be retrieved and translated into action. Action is represented by the internalisation of manager’s experiences into the activities of organisations. Thus, organisational learning is a cognitive change process of concepts such as frames of reference and dominant logic as individual cognitive structures evolve into shared insights. In this study, the outcome of the learning process is the capacity for organisational action in cross-cultural adaptability and sensitivity by the Japanese
expatriates during their Hong Kong assignment.

Organisational learning takes place through the acquisition of information and knowledge, which is a slow and cumulative process, or through sudden insights on a problem. However, it may be difficult for these insights to take place, due to the very complexity of the problem or the dominant cultural standard. This generate frustration and anxiety. In order to avoid frustration and anxiety, many Japanese expatriate managers said that they often merely ignored the problems. Furthermore, even though the Japanese expatriate managers understood the need to acquire knowledge and skills in cross-cultural adaptability and sensitivity, they might not be willing to do so due to the policy of the parent company that rejected managers who were “contaminated” by the local attitudes and work behaviours. Thus, learning at both individual and organisational level is difficult to be achieved in these two Japanese overseas retail companies.

Therefore, although many Japanese companies advocate localisation overseas, “real” localisation is hardly achieved. It is because “real” localisation needs more than raising local content of human resources, but have to raise the local activities of subsidiaries, and to adapt to the local ways of doing things and rules of the local markets and behave as “local firms” (Abo, 1989).

Another implication is that since many Japanese expatriate managers considered that a long absence in the parent company might reduce their career prospect in the parent company given the local and tangible nature of human relations in Japan, many of them endeavoured to reduce serious deterioration in their personal relationship with the relevant members of the parent company by making frequent trip to Japan and devote much time to private correspondence with former associates in Japan. This had diverted their attention from the needs of cross-cultural sensitivity learning on both individual and organisational levels in the Hong Kong operation.

In brief, from the evidence of the two Japanese retail companies in Hong Kong, the parent company not only used ethnocentric management approach, but also oriented towards direct control systems by Japanese expatriate managers. Thus, they used HRM systems
which pay, train and evaluate Japanese managers according to established standard of the parent company, which discouraged their ability in cross-cultural adaptability and their desire to organisational learning. This had produced the reactive or “steady-state mentality” among the Japanese expatriate managers who tended to focus their attention on the parent company rather than the overseas companies. Although Japanese multinational companies (MNCs) tend to staff a large number of Japanese expatriate managers in their overseas companies (Hanami and Blanpain, 1993; Kono, 1984), their expatriates tend to have low organisational learning in cross-cultural adaptation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the two Japanese retail companies in Hong Kong do not seem to intend to internationalise Japanese managers through international assignment. Instead, the Japanese expatriates are a major means for international management control. Therefore, it explains why the Japanese expatriates in these two Japanese companies only have zero or level I individual learning, and the two Japanese retail companies have no or single-looped organisational learning in cross-cultural sensitivity and adaptation ensued for the parent company. It implies that the long-term development of international human resource management in Japanese MNCs would be constrained if Japanese MNCs continue to employ ethnocentric approach in international management.

In this study, the underlying concerns as to why international assignment has not contributed to internationalising Japanese managers have been addressed. It can largely be attributed to the fact that Japanese expatriate managers tend to acquire limited cross-cultural sensitivity and adaptation learning at zero or level I as the international human resource management system adopted in the parent company does not encourage them to acquire cross-cultural sensitivity learning. In both companies, the expatriates learned reactively rather than proactively through either zero or single-loop organisational learning ensued for the parent company. The reactive learning approach stemmed from expatriates perceiving their career prospects related more to events back at the parent company than to the success or failure of the local subsidiary.
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The Faculty of Business consists of four Departments:

- Department of Accounting and Finance
- Department of Computer Studies
- Department of Management
- Department of Marketing and International Business

To meet the growing demand for business graduates, the Faculty offers integrative and specialisation courses leading to the Bachelor of Business Administration (Hons.) degree.

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