

Competitive Frontiers: Women Managing across Borders

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It doesn't make any difference if you are blue, green, purple, or a frog, if you have the best product at the best price, they'll buy.

American woman manager based in Hong Kong

About the single most uncontroversial, incontrovertible statement to make about women in international management is that there are very few of them. The evidence is both subjective and objective[1, p. 58]. As an executive in a global firm, would you hire a woman for an international management position? Would you send her abroad as an expatriate manager? Would she succeed? Would hiring her increase or decrease your firm's competitiveness?

Global Competition

Business today increasingly competes on a worldwide basis. Few firms have the luxury of competing primarily within their own domestic market. While some firms use country-specific multidomestic strategies, and thus compete in independent domestic markets, a much greater number have embraced globally integrated strategies structured around worldwide lines of business[13]. As global competition continues to intensify, firms are evolving transnational strategies. Such strategies simultaneously require the local responsiveness demanded by multidomestic strategies, the worldwide integration demanded by global strategies, along with an increased emphasis on organizational learning and innovation[14]. These business dynamics lead to:

Transnational networks of firms and divisions within firms, including an increasingly complex web of strategic alliances. Transnational firms ... are less hierarchically structured than firms operating in the previous phases. Power is no longer centered in a single headquarters that is ... dominated by any one national culture. As a consequence, both structural and cultural dominance are minimized, with cross-cultural interaction no longer following any pre-defined "passport hierarchy"[3, p. 56].

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This article is based on Dr Adler's recent work on transnationals[2,3] and her research on female expatriate managers[4-10]. The equity and complementary contribution approaches were originally presented in Adler[11] and Adler and Izraeli's first book, *Women in Management Worldwide*[12].

These organizational changes are affecting the number and role of women managers.

Women and Transnational Corporations

Given the increasing importance of transnational corporations, it is encouraging that their impact on women in management, to date, has been primarily positive. Transnational corporations include women in ways that domestic, multidomestic, and multinational firms do not. First, the extremely competitive business environment forces transnational firms to select the very best people available. The opportunity cost of prejudice – of rejecting women and limiting selection to men – is much higher than in previous economic environments. As *Fortune* succinctly stated, “The best reason for believing that more women will be in charge before long is that in a ferociously competitive global economy, no company can afford to waste valuable brainpower simply because it’s wearing a skirt”[15, p. 56]. This competitive advantage is heightened by a growing worldwide education differential favouring women.

Second, whereas domestic and multidomestic companies hire primarily local nationals, and therefore must closely adhere to local norms on hiring – or not hiring – female managers, transnational corporations are not similarly limited. Because the corporate culture of transnational firms is not coincident with the local culture of any particular country, transnationals have greater flexibility in defining selection and promotion criteria that best fit the firm’s needs rather than those which most closely mimic the historic patterns of a particular country. Said simply, transnationals can and do hire local women managers even in countries in which the local companies rarely do so.

US-based transnational corporations, for example, have often hired local female managers when local firms would not. This dynamic has been particularly pronounced in Japan where foreign corporations have had difficulty attracting top ranked male applicants (see [16,17]). American firms have led the way in hiring excellent Japanese women, while Japanese firms are still extremely reticent to hire them (see [18]). Interestingly, while still hiring fewer women than most American firms, Japanese multinationals operating in the United States hire more female managers in their American affiliates than they do in their home country operations[19].

By hiring women, transnationals act as role models for firms in many countries which have not seriously considered promoting significant numbers of women into managerial positions. The greater the number of expatriates involved in foreign affiliates, the less likely they are to follow local human resource practices – including being less likely to restrict the number of female managers[19]. The firm’s transnational character allows it organizational freedoms and imposes competitive demands not present in domestic or multidomestic environments.

Third, transnational corporations have begun to send women abroad as expatriate managers[8]. Because transnationals use expatriates and local managers, they can benefit from the greater flexibility that many cultures

afford foreign women. As will be described, most countries do not hold foreign women to the same professionally limiting roles that restrict local women (see [4,10]). The outstanding success of these female expatriate managers in all geographies – Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East – is encouraging firms both to continue sending women abroad[4,20] and to begin to promote more local women into management[10].

Fourth, whereas domestic, multidomestic, and multinational firms have been characterized by structural hierarchies, transnationals are increasingly characterized by networks of equals. Recent research suggests that women work particularly well in such networks:

Women ... are countering the values of the hierarchy with those of the web[21, p. 52] ... when describing their roles in their organizations, women usually refer ... to themselves as being in the middle of things ... Inseparable from their sense of themselves as being in the middle ... [is] women's notion of being connected to those around them ... [21, pp. 45-6].

Not surprisingly, transnational firms see women managers as bringing needed collaborative and participative skills to the workplace[22].

Fifth, leading management scholars have identified innovation as a key factor in global competitiveness (among others, see [14,23,24]). An inherent source of innovation is well-managed diversity, including gender diversity[25]. Women bring diversity to transnational corporations which have heretofore been primarily male.

Transnational corporations thus include more women than their predecessors could (or would) and benefit organizationally from their professional contributions in new ways. They benefit both from women's increased representation at all levels of the organization as well as from their unique ways of contributing to the organization that complement those of men.

Fundamental Assumptions: Different Approaches

Given women's current scarcity in the managerial ranks, transnational firms can use two approaches to leverage the potential of female managers: they can increase the number of female managers and executives and they can encourage their unique contribution. Unfortunately, many of their predecessors – domestic, multidomestic, and multinational firms – adopted neither approach; or limited themselves by focusing on only one of the two approaches.

As shown in Table I, firms have traditionally made one of two fundamentally different assumptions about the ideal role of women in management. Although generally implicit, the first reflects an equity approach based on assumed similarity, while the second defines a complementary contribution approach based on assumed difference. The first focuses on increasing the representation of women managers; the second on increasing their utilization at all levels of the organization.

The first, the equity approach, based on assumed similarity, has been used most pervasively in the United States. In this approach, firms assume that women are identical, as professionals, to men, and therefore equally capable of

Assumptions	Equity approach	Complementary contribution approach
<i>Fundamental assumptions</i>	Similarity	Difference
Men's and women's contributions	Identical	Complementary
Fairness based on	Equity	Valuing difference
<i>Strategic goal</i>	Equal access	Recognizing and valuing difference
Assessment	Quantitative	Qualitative
Measured by	Statistical proportion of women at each hierarchical level	Assessing women's contribution to organization's goals
Process	Counting women	Assessing women's contribution
<i>Measuring of effectiveness:</i>		
Women's contribution	Identical to men's	Complementary to men's
Norms	Identical for men and women	Unique to men and women
Based on	Historical "male" norms	Women's own contribution
Referent	Men	Women
<i>Acculturation process</i>	Assimilation	Synergy
Expected behaviour	Standardized	Differentiated
Based on	Male norms	Female norms
Essence	"Dress for success" business suit	Elegant, feminine attire
<i>Example</i>	United States: "The melting pot"	France: "Vive la difference!"
Source: [11, pp. 3-32].		

Table I.
Two Approaches to
Women in Management

contributing in ways similar to those of men. From this equity perspective, the primary question is one of entry into and representation within management. Is the firm hiring and promoting sufficient numbers of female managers? Primary change strategies include affirmative action programmes, equal rights legislation, and structural changes designed to avoid tokenism and to train women in managerial skills traditionally neglected during their formal education and informal socialization.

Given the equity approach's emphasis on equal entry into and equal representation within the male-dominated world of management, the equity approach's implicit goal for female managers is assimilation. Firms expected women to think, dress, and act like the men who had traditionally held the aspired-to management positions. Understandably, firms measured effectiveness against male norms: Could she do what he had been doing as well as he had been doing it? Or, according to *Fortune* [22, p. 58], "If you can't join

'em, beat 'em ... the way to overcome [discrimination] is to ... start outdoing men at their own game". The potential for women to make unique, but equally valuable, contributions to organizations remained outside the logic of the equity approach and therefore largely unrealized.

In contrast, the second approach, the complementary contribution approach, is based on the assumption of difference, not similarity. While originally used to describe Swedish managers[26], it has been pervasive throughout Europe and Japan, and evident in most other areas of the world. In the complementary contribution approach, firms assume women and men differ and therefore are capable of making different, but equally valuable, contributions to the organization (see [27-34]). Unlike in the equity approach, the goal is not assumed to be equal statistical representation, but rather equivalent recognition of and benefit from women's and men's differing patterns and styles of contribution at all levels of the organization.

From this second perspective, change strategies focus first on identifying the unique contributions of female and male managers; second, on creating enabling conditions to encourage and reward both types of contribution; and third, on creating synergy – combining women's and men's contributions to form more innovative and powerful organizational solutions to business challenges. Under this second set of assumptions, firms expect female managers to think, to dress, and to act like women. Female managers' thinking and behaviour, though similar in many ways to that of their male colleagues, is seen to differ in important respects.

Progress, as measured by the equity approach, is quantitative – a statistical accounting of the proportion of female managers in the organization by rank, salary, and status. As measured by the complementary contribution approach, progress is qualitative – an assessment of the organization's track record in encouraging and rewarding women and men for making unique contributions and for building organizationally effective combinations of those contributions; that is, for increasing innovation and organizational learning.

Interestingly, each approach has tended to be labelled as heresy when viewed through the eyes of the other. From the perspective of the equity approach, viewing women (or any other distinct group) as different was seen as tantamount to judging them as inferior (see [29]). Recognizing differences among female and male managers was implicitly equated with prejudice[25]. From this point of view, only one best way to manage exists, and equity demands that women be given equal access to that one way. By contrast, the complementary contribution approach posits that there are many equally valid, yet different, ways to manage. The best approach, based on recognizing, valuing, and combining differences, is synergistic. From this second perspective, not to see a female manager's uniqueness is to negate her identity and, consequently, to negate the potential for her unique contribution to the organization.

To predict what women's roles in management will be in the 1990s and the twenty-first century, it is important to understand the underlying assumptions

that firms make in each country about the role of women in management. To what extent is difference viewed as heresy, versus as a potential resource? To what extent is uniqueness seen as a constraint rather than as a valuable asset? Unlike their predecessors, transnational firms view female managers' increased representation and potentially unique contribution as complementary sources of competitive advantage rather than as either-or solutions, or, even more limiting, as societal constraints.

Unexpected Success: Women Managers across Borders

Cross-border business is fundamental to transnational firms. Unlike their previous approaches, such firms define managerial roles transnationally, with expatriate assignments forming a central component. Given the historical scarcity of local women managers in most countries, firms have questioned if women can function successfully in cross-border managerial assignments. They have believed that the relative absence of local women managers formed a basis for accurately predicting the potential for success, or lack thereof, of expatriate women.

Given the importance of these questions to future business success, a multi-part study was conducted on the role of women as expatriate managers. The research revealed the story of a noun, *woman*, that appears to have become mixed up with an adjective, *foreign*, when predicting expatriate managers' success. It revealed a set of assumptions that managers and executives make about how foreigners would treat expatriate women, based on their beliefs about how foreign firms treat their own local women. The problem with the story is that the assumptions proved to be false. Moreover, because the assumptions fail to reflect reality accurately, they are inadvertently causing executives to make decisions that are neither effective nor equitable.

The first part of the study sought to determine the proportion of women being selected for expatriate positions. Major North American multinational firms (686) were surveyed. They reported sending over 13,338 expatriate managers abroad, of whom 402, or 3 per cent, were women. Thus, North American firms send 32 times as many male as female expatriate managers abroad (see [8,9]). In comparison with this 3 per cent in international management, women held 37 per cent of domestic US management positions, 12 times as many as they held abroad[35].

Although the 3 per cent represents significantly fewer women working as expatriate managers than the proportion holding domestic management positions, this should not be viewed strictly as a poor showing, but rather as the beginning of a new trend. The vast majority of women who had ever held expatriate management positions were sent so recently that they are currently still working abroad.

Given transnationals' needs for the best qualified managers – whether female or male – the second, third, and fourth parts of the study sought to explain why so few women hold international management positions. Each part addressed

one of the three most commonly held “myths” about women in international management:

- (1) Women do not want to be international managers.
- (2) Companies refuse to send women abroad.
- (3) Foreigners’ prejudice against women renders them ineffective, even when interested in foreign assignments and successful in being sent.

These beliefs were labelled “myths” because, although widely held by both men and women, their accuracy had never been tested.

Myth 1: Women Do Not Want to Be International Managers

Is the problem that women are less interested than men in pursuing international careers? The study tested this myth by surveying more than 1,000 graduating MBAs from seven top management schools in the United States, Canada, and Europe[5,7]. The results revealed an overwhelming case of no significant difference: female and male MBAs display equal interest, or disinterest, in pursuing international careers. More than four out of five MBAs – both women and men – want an international assignment at some time during their career. Both female and male MBAs, however, agree that firms offer fewer opportunities to women than to men, and significantly fewer opportunities to women pursuing international careers than to those pursuing domestic careers.

Although there may have been a difference in the past, women and men today are equally interested in international management, including expatriate assignments. The first myth – that women do not want to be international managers – is, in fact, a myth.

Myth 2: Companies Refuse to Send Women Abroad

If the problem is not women’s disinterest, is it that companies refuse to select women for international assignments? To test if the myth of corporate resistance was true, human resource vice-presidents and managers from 60 of the largest North American multinationals were surveyed (see [6]). Over half of the companies reported that they hesitate to send women abroad. Almost four times as many reported being reluctant to select women for international assignments as for domestic management positions. When asked why they hesitate, almost three-quarters reported believing that foreigners were so prejudiced against women that the female managers could not succeed even if sent. Similarly, 70 per cent believed that dual-career issues were insurmountable. In addition, some human resource executives expressed concern about the women’s physical safety, the hazards involved in travelling in underdeveloped countries, and, especially in the case of single women, the isolation and loneliness.

Many of the women who succeeded in being sent abroad as expatriate managers report having confronted some form of corporate resistance before being sent abroad. For example:

Malaysia. Management assumed that women didn't have the physical stamina to survive in the tropics. They claimed I couldn't hack it [in Malaysia].

Japan and Korea. Everyone was more or less curious if it would work. My American boss tried to advise me, "Don't be upset if it's difficult in Japan and Korea". The American male manager in Tokyo was also hesitant. Finally the Chinese boss in Hong Kong said, "We have to try!" Then they sent me.

A few women experienced severe resistance from their companies to sending any female managers abroad. Their firms seemed to offer them an expatriate position only after all potential male candidates had turned it down. For example:

Thailand. Every advance in responsibility is because the Americans had no choice. I've never been chosen over someone else.

Japan. They never would have considered me. But then the financial manager in Tokyo had a heart attack, and they had to send someone. So they sent me, on a month's notice, as a temporary until they could find a man to fill the permanent position. It worked out, and I stayed.

Although most of the women are sent in the same capacity as their male expatriate colleagues, some companies demonstrate their hesitation by offering temporary or travel assignments rather than regular expatriate positions. For instance:

Hong Kong. After offering me the job, they hesitated: "Could a woman work with the Chinese?" So my job was defined as temporary, a one-year position to train a Chinese man to replace me. I succeeded and became permanent.

These findings concur with those of 100 top line managers in *Fortune* 500 firms; the majority of whom believe that women face overwhelming resistance when seeking managerial positions in international divisions of US firms[36]. Similarly, 80 per cent of US firms report believing that women would face disadvantages if sent abroad[20]. Thus, the second myth is, in fact, true: firms are hesitant, if not outright resistant, to sending female managers abroad.

Myth 3: Foreigners' "Prejudice" against Female Expatriate Managers

Is it true that foreigners are so prejudiced against women that they could not succeed as international managers? Would sending a female manager abroad be neither fair to the woman nor effective for the company? Is the treatment of local women the best predictor of expatriate women's potential to succeed? The fundamental question was, and remains: is the historic discrimination against local women worldwide a valid basis for predicting expatriate women's success as international managers?

To investigate this third myth – that foreigners' prejudice against women renders them ineffective as international managers, over 100 women managers from major North American firms who were on expatriate assignments around the world were surveyed. Fifty-two were interviewed while in Asia or after having returned from Asia to North America[4,10]. Since most of the women

held regional responsibility, their experience represents multiple countries rather than just their country of foreign residence.

Who are the female expatriate managers? The women were very well educated and quite internationally experienced. Almost all held graduate degrees, the MBA being the most common. Over three-quarters had had extensive international interests and experience prior to their present company sending them abroad. On average, the women spoke two or three languages, with some fluently speaking as many as six. In addition, they had excellent social skills. Nearly two-thirds were single and only three had children.

Firms using transnational strategies sent more women than did those using other strategies, with financial institutions leading all other industries. On average, the expatriate assignments lasted two-and-a-half years, with a range from six months to six years. The women supervised up to 25 subordinates, with the average falling just below five. Their titles and levels within their firms varied: some held very junior positions – assistant account manager – while others held quite senior positions, including one regional vice-president. In no firm did a female expatriate hold her company's number one position in the region or in any country.

The women were considerably younger than the typical male expatriate. Their ages ranged from 23 to 41 years, with the average age just under 30. This reflects the relatively high proportion of women sent by financial institutions – an industry that sends fairly junior managers on international assignments – and the relatively low proportion sent by manufacturing firms, which select quite senior managers for expatriate positions (such as country or regional director).

The decision to go. For most firms, the female expatriates were “firsts”: only 10 per cent followed another woman into her international position. Of the 90 per cent who were “firsts”, almost a quarter represented the first female manager the firm had ever sent abroad. Others were the first women sent to the region, the first sent to the particular country, or the first to fill the specific expatriate position. Clearly, neither the women nor the companies had the luxury of role models or of following previously established patterns. Except for several major financial institutions, both the women and the companies found themselves experimenting, in hope of uncertain success.

Most women described themselves as needing to encourage their companies to consider the possibility of assigning international positions to women in general and to themselves in particular. In more than four out of five cases, the woman initially suggested the idea of an international assignment to her boss and company. For only six women did the company first suggest the assignment.

Since most firms had never considered sending a female manager abroad, the women used a number of strategies to introduce the idea and to position their careers internationally. Many explored the possibility of an international assignment during their original job interview and eliminated companies from consideration which were totally against the idea. Other women informally

introduced the idea to their boss and continued to mention it at appropriate moments until the company ultimately decided to offer her an expatriate position. A few women formally applied for a number of international assignments prior to actually being selected and sent.

Many women attempted to be in the right place at the right time. For example, one woman who predicted that Hong Kong would be her firm's next major business centre arranged to assume responsibility for the Hong Kong desk in New York, leaving the rest of Asia to a male colleague. The strategy paid off: within a year, the company elevated its Hong Kong operations to a regional centre and sent her to Asia as their first female expatriate manager.

Most women claimed that their companies had failed to recognize the possibility of selecting women for international assignments, rather than having thoroughly considered the idea and then having rejected it. For the majority of the women, the obstacle appeared to be the company's naïvety, not malice. For many women, the most difficult hurdle in their international career involved being sent abroad in the first place, not – as most had anticipated – gaining the respect of foreigners and succeeding once sent.

Did it work? The impact of being female. Almost all of the female expatriate managers (97 per cent) reported that their international assignments were successful. This success rate is considerably higher than that reported for North American male expatriates. While the women's assessments are subjective, objective indicators support that most assignments, in fact, succeeded. For example, the majority of the firms – after experimenting with their first female expatriate manager – decided to send more women abroad. In addition, most companies promoted the women on the basis of their foreign performance and/or offered them other international assignments following completion of the first one.

Advantages. Given the third myth, the women would have been expected to experience a series of difficulties caused by their being female and, perhaps, to create a corresponding set of solutions designed to overcome each difficulty. This was not the case. Almost half of the expatriates (42 per cent) reported that being female served as more of an advantage than a disadvantage; 16 per cent found it to be both positive and negative; 22 per cent saw it as being either irrelevant or neutral; and only 20 per cent found it to be primarily negative.

The women reported numerous professional advantages to being female. Most frequently, they described the advantage of being highly visible. Foreign clients were curious about them, wanted to meet them, and remembered them after the first encounter. The women therefore found it easier for them than for their male colleagues to gain access to foreign clients' time and attention. The women gave examples of this high visibility, accessibility, and memorability, such as:

Japan. It's the visibility as an expat, and even more as a woman. I stick in their minds. I know I've obtained more business than my two male colleagues ... [My clients] are extra interested in me.

India and Pakistan. In India and Pakistan, being a woman helps in marketing and client contact. I got in to see customers because they had never seen a female banker before ... Having a female banker adds value to the client.

Again contrary to the third myth, the female managers discovered a number of advantages based on their interpersonal skills, including that the local men could talk more easily about a wider range of topics with them than with their male counterparts. For example:

Indonesia. I often take advantage of being a woman. I'm more supportive than my male colleagues ... [Clients] relax and talk more. And 50 per cent of my effectiveness is based on volunteered information.

Korea. Women are better at treating men sensitively, and they just like you. One of my Korean clients told me, "I really enjoyed ... working with you".

Many women also described the high social status accorded local women and found that such status was not denied them as foreign women. The women often received special treatment which their male counterparts did not receive. Clearly, it was always salient that they were women, but being a woman was not antithetical to succeeding as a manager.

Hong Kong. Single female expats travel easier and are treated better. Never hassled. No safety issues. Local offices take better care of you. They meet you, take you through customs ... It's the combination of treating you like a lady and a professional.

Japan. It's an advantage that attracts attention. They are interested in meeting a *gaijin*, a foreign woman. Women attract more clients. On calls to clients, they elevate me, give me more rank. If anything, the problem, for men and women, is youth, not gender.

In addition, most of the women described benefiting from a "halo effect". The majority of the women's foreign colleagues and clients had never met or previously worked with a female expatriate manager. Similarly, the local community was highly aware of how unusual it was for North American multinationals to send female managers abroad. Hence, the local managers assumed that the women would not have been sent unless they were "the best", and therefore expected them to be "very, very good".

Indonesia. It's easier being a woman here than in any place in the world, including New York City ... I never get the comments I got in New York, like "What is a nice woman like you doing in this job?"

Japan. They assumed I must be good if I was sent. They became friends.

Some women found being female to have no impact whatsoever on their professional life. Many of these women worked primarily with the Chinese:

Hong Kong. There are many expat and foreign women in top positions here. If you are good at what you do, they accept you. One Chinese woman told me, "Americans are always watching you. One mistake and you are done. Chinese take a while to accept you and then stop testing you".

Asia. There's no difference. They respect professionalism ... including in Japan. There is no problem in Asia.

Disadvantages. The women also experienced a number of disadvantages in being female expatriate managers. Interestingly enough, the majority of the disadvantages involved the women's relationship with their home companies, not with their foreign colleagues and clients. As noted earlier, a major problem involved the women's difficulty in obtaining an international position in the first place.

Another problem involved home companies initially limiting the duration of the women's assignments to six months or a year, rather than offering the more standard two to three years. While temporary assignments may appear to offer companies a logically cautious strategy, in reality they create an unfortunate self-fulfilling prophecy. When the home company is not convinced that a woman can succeed (and therefore offers her a temporary rather than a permanent position), it communicates the company's lack of confidence to foreign colleagues and clients as a lack of commitment. The foreigners then mirror the home company's behaviour by also failing to take the woman manager seriously. Assignments become very difficult, or can fail altogether, when companies demonstrate a lack of initial confidence and commitment. As one expatriate woman working in Indonesia described, "It is very important to clients that I am permanent. It increases trust, and that is critical".

A subsequent problem involved the home company limiting the woman's professional opportunities and job scope once she was abroad. More than half of the female expatriates experienced difficulties in persuading their home companies to give them latitude equivalent to that given to their male counterparts, especially initially. For example, some companies, out of supposed concern for the woman's safety, limited her travel (and thus the regional scope of her responsibility), thus excluding very remote, rural, and underdeveloped areas. Other companies, as mentioned previously, initially limited the duration of the woman's assignment to six months or a year, rather than the more standard two to three years. For example:

Japan. My problem is overwhelmingly with Americans. They identify it as a male market ... geisha girls ...

Thailand (petroleum company). The Americans wouldn't let me on the drilling rigs, because they said there were no accommodations for a woman. Everyone blames it on something else. They gave me different work. They had me on the sidelines, not planning and communicating with drilling people. It's the expat Americans, not the Thais, who'll go to someone else before they come to me.

A few companies limited the women to working only internally with company employees, rather than externally with clients. These companies often implicitly assumed that their own employees were somehow less prejudiced than were outsiders. In reality, the women often found the opposite to be true. They faced more problems from the home country nationals within their own organizations than externally from local clients and colleagues. As one woman described:

Hong Kong. It was somewhat difficult internally. They feel threatened, hesitant to do what I say, resentful. They assume I don't have the credibility a man would have. Perhaps it's harder

internally than externally, because client relationships are one-on-one and internally it's more of a group; or perhaps it's harder because they have to live with it longer internally; or perhaps it's because they fear that I'm setting a precedent or because they fear criticism from their peers.

Managing foreign clients' and colleagues' initial expectations was one area that proved difficult for many women. Some found initial meetings to be "tricky", especially when a male colleague from their own company was present. Since most local managers had never previously met a North American expatriate woman who held a managerial position, there was considerable ambiguity as to who she was, her status, her level of expertise, authority, and responsibility, and therefore the appropriate form of address and demeanour towards her.

People's Republic of China. I speak Chinese, which is a plus. But they'd talk to the men, not to me. They'd assume that I, as a woman, had no authority. The Chinese want to deal with top, top level people, and there is always a man at a higher level.

Asia. It took extra time to establish credibility with the Japanese and Chinese. One Japanese manager said to me, "When I first met you, I thought you would not be any good because you were a woman."

Since most of the North American women whom local managers had ever met previously were expatriates' wives or secretaries, they naturally assumed that the new woman was not a manager. Hence, they often directed initial conversations to male colleagues, not to the newly arrived female manager. Senior male colleagues, particularly those from the head office, became very important in redirecting the focus of early discussions back towards the women. When this was done, old patterns were quickly broken and smooth ongoing work relationships were established. When the pattern was ignored or poorly managed, the challenges to credibility, authority, and responsibility became chronic and undermined the women's effectiveness.

As mentioned earlier, many women described the most difficult aspect of the foreign assignment as getting sent abroad in the first place. Overcoming resistance from the North American home company frequently proved more challenging than gaining local clients' and colleagues' respect and acceptance. In most cases, assumptions about foreigners' prejudice against female expatriate managers appear to have been exaggerated: the anticipated prejudice and the reality did not match. It appears that foreigners are not as prejudiced as many North American managers had assumed.

The *Gaijin* Syndrome

One pattern is particularly clear: first and foremost, foreigners are seen as foreigners. Like their male colleagues, female expatriates are seen as foreigners, not as local people. A woman who is a foreigner (a *gaijin*) is not expected to act like the local women. Therefore, the societal and cultural rules, governing the behaviour of local women, which limit their access to managerial positions and responsibility do not apply to foreign women. Although women are considered the "culture bearers" in all societies, foreign women are not expected to assume

the cultural roles that societies have traditionally reserved for their own women. As one female expatriate in Japan described:

The Japanese are very smart: they can tell that I am not Japanese, and they do not expect me to act as a Japanese woman. They will allow and condone behaviour in foreign women that would be absolutely unacceptable in their own women.

Similarly a Tokyo-based personnel vice-president for a major international bank explained[37, pp. 1; 27]:

Being a foreigner is so weird to the Japanese that the marginal impact of being a woman is nothing. If I were a Japanese woman, I couldn't be doing what I'm doing here. But they know perfectly well that I'm not.

Many of the female expatriates related similar examples of their unique status as "foreign women" rather than as "women" *per se*. For example:

Japan and Korea. Japan and Korea are the hardest, but they know that I'm an American woman, and they don't expect me to be like a Japanese or Korean woman. It's possible to be effective even in Japan and Korea if you send a senior woman with at least three or four years of experience, especially if she's fluent in Japanese.

Pakistan. Will I have problems? No! There is a double standard between expats and local women. The Pakistanis test you, but you enter as a respected person.

Japan. I don't think the Japanese could work for a Japanese woman ... but they just block it out for foreigners.

Hong Kong. Hong Kong is very cosmopolitan. I'm seen as an expat, not as an Asian, even though I am an Asian American.

Conclusion

It seems that we have confused an adjective, *foreign*, with a noun, *woman*, in predicting foreigners' reactions to expatriate women. We expected the most salient characteristic of a female expatriate manager to be that she is a woman and predicted her success based on the success of the local women in each country. In fact, the most salient characteristic is that expatriates are foreign, and the best predictor of their success is the success of other foreigners (in this case, other North Americans) in the particular country. Local managers see female expatriates as foreigners who happen to be women, not as women who happen to be foreigners. The difference is crucial. Given the uncertainty involved in sending women managers to all areas of the world, our assumptions about the greater salience of gender (female/male) over nationality (foreign/local) have caused us to make false predictions concerning women's potential to succeed as executives and managers in foreign countries.

The third myth – that foreigners' prejudice precludes women's effectiveness as international managers – is, in fact, a myth. Of the three myths, only the second myth proved to be true. The first myth proved false: Women *are* interested in working internationally. The third myth proved false: Women do succeed internationally, once sent. However, the second myth proved to be true: Companies are hesitant, if not completely unwilling, to send women managers

abroad. Given that the problem is caused primarily by the home companies' assumptions and decisions, the solutions are also largely within their control.

Recommendations

In considering women managers for international assignments, both the companies and the women need to approach the decision and the assignment in a number of new ways.

Recommendations to Companies:

- (1) *Do not assume that it will not work.* Do not assume that foreigners will treat expatriate female managers the same way they treat their own local women. Our assumptions about the salience of gender over nationality have led to totally inaccurate predictions. Therefore, do not confuse adjectives with nouns; do not use the success or failure of local women to predict that of female foreigners.
- (2) *Do not confuse the role of a spouse with that of a manager.* Although the single most common reason for male expatriates' failure and early return from international assignments is the dissatisfaction of their wives, this does not mean that women cannot cope in a foreign environment. The role of the spouse (whether male or female) is much more ambiguous and, consequently, the cross-cultural adjustment is much more demanding for the spouse than for the employee[25]. Wives (female spouses) have had trouble adjusting, but their situation is not analogous to that of female managers, and therefore is not predictive.
- (3) *Do not assume that a woman will not want to go abroad.* Ask her. Although both single and married women need to balance private- and professional-life considerations, many are very interested in taking international assignments. Moreover, the proportion of women interested in working abroad is identical to that of men, and can be predicted to increase over the coming decade.
- (4) *Offer flexible benefits packages.* Given that most expatriate benefits packages have been designed to meet the needs of traditional families (employed husband, non-employed wife, and children), companies should be prepared to modify their benefits packages to meet the needs of managers who are single (female or male) and dual-career couples. Such modifications might include increased lead time in announcing assignments, executive search services for the partner in dual-career couples, and payment for "staying connected" – including telephone and airfare expenses – for couples who choose some form of commuting rather than both simultaneously relocating abroad.
- (5) *Give women every opportunity to succeed.* Accord her full status at the outset – not that of a temporary or experimental expatriate – with the appropriate title to communicate the home office's commitment to her. Do

not be surprised if local colleagues and clients initially direct their comments to male managers rather than to the new female expatriate during their first meeting with her. However, do not accept such behaviour: redirect discussion, where appropriate, to the woman. Such behaviour from foreign colleagues should not be interpreted as prejudice, but rather as a reaction to a new, ambiguous, and unexpected situation.

Recommendations to Female Expatriate Managers:

The female expatriates had a number of suggestions for the women managers who will follow in their footsteps.

- (1) *Assume naivety, not malice.* Realize that sending women abroad is new, perceived as risky, and still fairly poorly understood. In most cases, companies and foreign managers are operating on the basis of untested assumptions, many of which are faulty, not on the basis of prejudice. The most successful approach is to be gently persistent in “educating” the company to be open to the possibility of sending a woman abroad and granting her the status and support usually accorded to male peers in similar situations.
- (2) *Be excellent.* Given that expatriating women is perceived as risky, no woman will be sent abroad if she is not seen as technically and professionally excellent. In addition, beyond being extremely well qualified, arrange to be in the right place at the right time.
- (3) *Address private life issues directly.* For single women, the issue of loneliness, and for married women, the issue of managing a dual-career relationship, must be addressed. Contact with other expatriate women has proved helpful in both situations. For dual-career couples, most women considered it critical that they had discussed the possibility of an international assignment with their husband long before it became a reality, and that they had developed options that would work for them as a couple. For most couples, this meant creating alternatives that had never, or rarely, been tried in the particular company. Realize that expatriate status inadvertently helps to solve some of the role overload problems experienced by women who are managers, wives, and mothers. Since most expatriate managers can afford household help while on expatriate assignment, but not in their home country, they are able to reduce substantially the demands on their time. As one American expatriate manager in Hong Kong described, “It would be impossible for me to do what I’m doing here if I was still in the United States. There just wouldn’t be enough time!”

Global competition is, and will continue to be, intense in the 1990s. Transnational corporations, faced with the most intense global competition, may well continue to lead in hiring and promoting women into significant international management positions. Can they risk not choosing the best person

just because her gender does not fit the traditional managerial profile? Needs for competitive advantage, not an all-consuming social conscience, may answer the question, if not in fact define it. Successful companies will select both women and men to manage their cross-border operations. The options of limiting international management to one gender has become an archaic "luxury" that no company can afford. The only remaining question is how quickly and effectively each company will increase the number and use of women in their worldwide managerial workforce.

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