

International mobility: insights in the factors that can lead to an
unsuccessful international assignment and
recommendations to increase
the success of an international assignment.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

International assignments are on the rise as a recent study of PWC (2012) has indicated that mobility levels have increased by 25% over the last decade and they have predicted a further growth of 50% by 2020. There are different reasons for this increase in international assignments, it is no longer only due to organizations needing employees to complete tasks in foreign subsidiaries (Dickmann, 2010) or for knowledge transfer (Bonache et al. 2001), but also Millennials are interested in pursuing a career in which they at least once can go on an international assignment (Adler 2002; Stahl 2009).

Even though an increase in international assignments is foreseen, many international assignments do not turn out to be successful for the organization as they are not completed as planned (Caligiuri et al., 2001; Stahl & Cerdin, 2004). An international assignment can be divided into three stages, the pre-assignment stage, the actual assignment and the post-assignment stage. International assignments can become unsuccessful in all stages of the international assignment. Most academic literature in the field of international assignments are focused on identifying problems that could arise during the first and the second stage of the international assignment (Black et al., 1999; Tung, 1998) and tried to identify elements that can increase the success of international assignments (Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall, 1992). Even though scholars have identified different factors throughout the years that can contribute to a successful international assignment; the number of the successful international assignments is still low as about 20-25% of the repatriated employees leave the firm within a year after returning from the assignment (Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall, 1992; Stahl, 2009). Reasons for unsuccessful assignments could be caused by employees or organizations prematurely terminating the international assignment. Another reason that could lead to an unsuccessful international assignment is when an international assignee leaves the company within a short timeframe after having returned to the home country. In all of these examples both the employee and the organization are impacted. For organizations unsuccessful international assignments often result in high costs, first of all because in general the total costs of the international assignment for organizations is often much more than two times higher than the total costs would be if the employee stayed in the home country (Anderson, 2005). Secondly, there are high costs for organizations when there is an unsuccessful international assignment due to among others lost expenses for training and relocation (Van der Bank & Rothmann, 2006), but also losses that are incurred for the often high-paid salary and costs for recruitment and replacement costs of personnel (Cole & Nesbeth, 2014). For the employee the consequences of an unsuccessful international assignment also could be financial, however most often the consequences result in a lowered self-esteem and loss of respect from colleagues (Cole & Nesbeth, 2014), especially in those cases where it is the organization that has terminated the international assignment prematurely. The negative consequences of an unsuccessful assignment for the organization are the motivation for this paper.

In order for organizations to be able to increase the success of international assignments they will need to have insights in the factors that can influence the success of an international assignment in all three stages of the international assignment. An understanding of these factors can help organizations minimize the risk of an unsuccessful international assignment as with that knowledge they will be able to (re)adjust their mobilisation strategies.

This paper attempts to provide a high level overview of the factors that can influence the success of an international assignment based on a literature review. These factors are provided for each stage of the international assignment, thus the pre-assignment stage, the actual assignment and the post-assignment stage. This paper ends by providing organizations with recommendations that can increase the success of their international assignments. The research question that this paper aims to answer is the following:

How can the success of an international assignment be increased?

To come to the answer of the research question of this paper, the following sub-questions will be examined:

- What is a successful international assignment?
- Which factors can lead to an unsuccessful international assignment in the pre-assignment stage?
- Which factors can lead to an unsuccessful international assignment during the actual assignment?
- Which factors can lead to an unsuccessful international assignment in the post-assignment stage?

In the literature many different international assignments can be identified, from short-term assignments (Kühlmann, 2014) in which the duration of the assignment could last up to 6 months to long-term assignments in which the duration of the assignment could last up to five years. This paper is written to identify the factors that could lead to an unsuccessful international assignment in the long-term assignments. Furthermore, individuals are sent on international assignments in organizations of all sizes ranging from firms with less than 5 employees sending employee(s) on international assignments once every two years for example. These small organizations do not tend to have a policy for international assignments. Large multinationals on the other hand could send over a 1000 employees a year on international assignments. These organizations often have global mobility team(s) in place that makes general policies for all the different types of international assignments. This paper is also written to provide insights in the factors could lead to unsuccessful international assignments for these large multinationals, as these organizations often also have the financial resources to implement some of the recommendations of this paper-

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, a definition is given of what an international assignment is and what it is that makes it successful. In Chapter 2, a definition is given of what an international assignment is and what it is that makes it successful. Also the three stages of an international assignment are discussed. In Chapter 3, a high level overview is presented of the different factors that can lead to an unsuccessful international assignment in the pre-assignment stage. In Chapter 4, a high level overview is presented of the factors that can lead to an international assignment not being completed during the assignment. In Chapter 5, a high level overview is presented of the factors that can lead to an unsuccessful assignment in the post-assignment stage. In Chapter 6 the conclusion is given. In Chapter 7, limitations to this study are presented and ideas for future research are presented.

Chapter 2: A successful international assignment

This chapter discusses the existing literature on international assignments and will provide a definition for a successful international assignment. This chapter will also discuss the different types of international assignments and the three stages of an international assignment.

2.1 International assignment

In the existing literature one of the first articles on international assignments has been written almost 50 years ago. Due to globalization and the increase in international assignments so has the research on international assignments seen a rise. In the literature different names for international assignments can be found, such as an expatriate assignment (Stahl et al. 2002). Even though different names can be used to indicate that an assignment is an international assignment, most of them have a similar definition and that is an international assignment is when an individual leaves a country for a certain period of time to live and work in another country. The country from which the individual moves from and worked in initially is called the home country. The home country doesn't have to be the country where the employee had citizenship. The country to where the individual moves to is called the host country and the company wherein the individual will work in the host country is called the host company.

International assignments are important for organizations as it is a less expensive way often to transfer knowledge from the home country to the host country if that knowledge isn't available in that country or entity, it enables the organization to send an employee to complete specific tasks in foreign subsidiaries (Dickmann, 2010) and many other reasons. But not only companies see the benefits of international assignments, also employees are interested in going on an international assignment as they believe that it will be beneficial for their career and the motives for most employees to take on an international assignment is among others personal challenge and professional development. Also Millennials are interested in pursuing a career in which they at least once can go on an international assignment (Adler 2002; Stahl 2009).

2.2 Successful international assignment

Many scholars have looked at what it is that makes an international assignment successful. The criteria they have used to assess this where among others completion of the actual international assignment, organizational commitment and cross-cultural competencies. For certain organizations an international assignment, such as those where the reason for the assignment was too simply complete a task, a successful international assignment could be defined as an assignment in which the task is completed. Also in most literature this is being used to define a failed international assignment, for example Brewster (1988) indicated had defined a failed international assignment as 'assignments from which expatriates had to be brought back home earlier than planned as a result of problems experienced by themselves or their families, or by problems they have created for the organization'. However as almost one fourth of the repatriated employees leave the firm within a year after the assignment (Stahl, 2009; Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall, 1992), organizations should also take this one year after the international assignment into consideration. Reasons for this could be that most firms would like to have the knowledge and experience that was gained by the expat in the host country to be transferred back to the employees in the home country. And having expats

that were able to successfully complete their role in the host country, but who have left the firm within a year probably didn't have had enough time to transfer the knowledge, leading to an unsuccessful international assignment. Based on the above, the used definition for a successful international assignment in this study is as follows:

A successful international assignment is an international assignment in which all three stages of the international assignment are successfully completed, and the expat still works for the firm after one year.

In this paper, based on the above, an unsuccessful international assignment in this thesis is defined as follows:

An unsuccessful international assignment is an international assignment in which not all three stages of the international assignment are successfully completed, and the expat leaves the firm within one year after returning from the host country

2.3 Expat

One thing that is constant in most literature is the given name for the assignee of the international assignment, the expat. An expat is an individual that moves from the home country to a host country to work there.

In the last 30 years the profile of the "typical" expat has changed. In the 80s the expat population consisted mainly of white married males that were the breadwinners of their household, moving with their spouses and children to the host country. The expat population nowadays is much more diverse. Of the expat population, those that are married have a partner that also works and has a career (Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016); these are the so called dual-career couples. A change in the profile of the expat can also be seen in the age of the expat, as now most of the expats (82%) are under the age of 50 and 19% of the expats are female (Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016). Furthermore Caligiuri and Bonache (2016) have identified that the expats come from all levels in the organization, while expats used to be mainly managers.

2.4 Types of International Assignments

In the existing literature many types of international assignment can be identified (Kühlmann, 2004), from International Business Traveller to a Long-Term Assignment. This paper uses the typology of international assignments provided by Kühlmann (2004). In Appendix 1 the typology of Kühlmann (2004) has been summarized in a table by (Weinberger, 2014). Kühlmann (2004) has identified six types of international assignments, wherein the shortest assignment is identified as the "International Business Traveller". Assignments of this type have a duration of up to 15 days. An example of this type of international assignment could be when an organization needs someone to sign a client contract or to meet a client. The second assignment type that is identified is the "Project Worker" assignment, this assignment has a duration of up to 90 days. As the name of the assignment indicates this type of assignment often occurs when there is a certain project that needs to be completed or done. The third type of an international assignment identified by Kühlmann (2004) is

the “Construction Worker” assignment, which has a maximum duration of six months. The fourth assignment type is the “Short-Term assignment”, which has a maximum duration of up to one year. Family members often do not join the expat on this assignment. Starting from the fourth type of an international assignment identified by Kühlmann (2004) the expat often becomes a tax residence, the expat however still has a contractual basis in the home country. Furthermore on international assignments that are longer than a year, the family often joins the expat on the assignment. From the fifth international assignment type, the “long-term assignment”, expats can stay up to five years in the host country. The expats in this stage do not have a contractual basis with the home country, but with the host country. There however could be a dormant employment contract with the home country or a guaranteed right to return could be included in the contract. The last type of an international assignment identified by Kühlmann (2004) is the “Local-to-Local transfer”; here there is no limit for the duration of the assignment. Expats that go on such an assignment often do not return to the home country.

In this paper answers to the research question and sub-questions are given for the Long-Term assignments as named by Kühlmann (2004).

2.5 Three stages of an international assignment

International assignment can be divided into three stages, the pre-assignment stage, the actual assignment and the post-assignment stage.

2.5.1. The pre-assignment

In the pre-assignment stage the selection of the expat takes place and the preparations for the assignment are being made. In the selection stage, the expat is selected based on different criteria often depending on the reason for the assignment. The expat in most cases is selected by the manager that needs an expat. For example if a manager requires an expat with certain technical knowledge, that specific technical knowledge will be one of the selection criteria that is being used. However if a manager from host country needs an expat, often the vacancy for the international assignment is shared in the (whole) company. The manager will then be able to select candidates from the pool of applicants.

If managers are able to select expats from their own team for a certain international assignment, managers often tend to select expats based on their domestic track record and the technical expertise of the individual seems to be a criterion that is often used (Bonache, Brewster and Suutari, 2001). However next to selecting someone on their technical knowledge as described in the previous example, or any other specific knowledge or experience depending on the reason for the assignment, expats should also be selected on criteria that selects expats based on their ability to work and live in a country and a culture that is different from their home country. Criteria that could be used for this is the ability to adapt to a new environment or their language skills. In the next chapter more information is provided on the selecting criteria and the factors that could contribute to them leading to an unsuccessful international assignment.

Once an expat is selected, the preparation for the actual assignment can start. In this stage the employee will need to be prepared for the assignment. The preparation for the individual often starts

in the home country, by having different meetings with the employee informing them what to expect. Next to this, the expat could get cultural training(s) to get acquainted with the culture in the host country. This will be especially helpful if the culture differs too much from the culture in the home country. For example when the home country of an expat is The Netherlands and the expat will move to Japan, which is a country that is very hierarchical. The expat should be made aware of this ahead of the assignment. Next to the cultural training, expats sometimes also get a language course and in some situations also the family of the expat is provided with one or more of these trainings. Furthermore, in some cases preparatory visits are also provided to the assignee and the family.

2.5.2. The actual assignment

In the second stage of the international assignment, the actual assignment takes place. This stage starts at the moment that the individual has left the home country and moved to the host country to the moment that the expat moves back to the home country. This is often one of the most difficult stages as there are so many changes in the environment that the expat needs to handle, this stage is therefore one of the most researched stages of an international assignment. Especially in the start of the assignment the expat needs to deal with changes regarding housing, (finding) schooling for the children, new colleagues, new work environment, new culture, etc. In the “middle” of this stage expats often have their own friends and have their routine in the country. Around the time that the end of this stage nears, the expat is often already focused on returning to the home country and might be worried with regards to having a job upon return. It is therefore important that the organization manages the expectations of the employee prior to the return to the home country to reduce the uncertainty for the employee. At least a few months prior to this stage the home country should keep in contact with the expat and keep them up-to-date of how it's going in the home country and home company, this to keep the expat engaged with the home company.

2.5.3. The post-assignment stage

The third stage, the post-assignment stage, consists of repatriation and career management of the expat. This stage lasts from the moment that the expat arrived in the home country to a period of one year after the return date in the home country. This stage defines whether an international assignment will be successful or not. In this stage the organization needs to manage repatriation. Once expats return to their home country, especially if they have been away for a few years, often many elements have changed such as their colleagues and the company culture. The expat and the family often have to get used to being back in the home country and to the new changes. Expats in this stage often tend to question who they are, and what they want to do next in their career or personal life. The repatriation rate is therefore quite high as 20-25% of the repatriated employees leave the firm within a year after returning from the assignment (Stahl, 2009; Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall, 1992).

Chapter 3: Factors that can lead to an unsuccessful international assignment in the pre-assignment stage

International assignments can already be unsuccessful in the pre-assignment stage. In the pre-assignment stage of an international assignment the focus is on selecting the right candidate for the job and making the necessary preparations for the assignee to go on the international assignment (Bonache, Brewster and Suutari, 2001). Researchers in this stage often focus on researching how the right individual for the assignment should be selected and on what criteria (Caligiuri, 2000) and on how the preparation for an international assignment can be optimized (Minter, 2008; Velten, 2017).

This chapter will provide a high level overview of the most important factors that could negatively influence an international assignment, possibly resulting in an unsuccessful international assignment in the pre-assignment stage. The sequence of the factors that are named in this chapter have nothing to do with their importance, all named factors could contribute to an unsuccessful international assignment in the pre-assignment stage.

3.1 Selecting criteria

In this stage of the international assignment, the reason for the international assignment is often already clear. Reasons for sending someone abroad can be very diverse, from managers needing someone to temporarily fulfill a role or gap in another entity, needing individuals with specific technical skills and or know-how. Once it is clear that an international assignment is needed, the next step is finding the right individual to send abroad. In the selection process some organizations tend to select individuals that perform their job successfully in the home country by assuming that they will also fulfill that role successfully in the host country. However having an individual performing a job successfully in the home country, doesn't have to mean that they will also be able to achieve the same results in the host country as all other factors have changed, such as the housing of the individual, the working environment and the culture of the host country differs from that of the home country. All these changes can have an influence on the employee and the performance of the employee.

When selecting individuals for the right job it is therefore important to look at many different selection criteria instead of focusing on only one or two. As by focusing on only a few selection criteria, organizations miss other factors that can lead to an unsuccessful international assignment, but what could have been assessed during the selection process or taken into consideration prior to the actual assignment. Research has shown that it is important to select individuals on some of the following criteria, language skills, personality and characteristics of the individual (Anderson, 2005). Other criteria that should also be included in the selection criteria is the ability of an individual to adapt, as one of the most provided reasons for failed international assignments was the disability of expats to adjust to living in the host country (Tung, 1981). Organizations should also ask the individuals whether they are willing to go abroad, as a high intrinsic motivation is associated with a greater willingness to accept an international assignment is (Haines, et al. 2008), the bigger the chance is of the employee completing the international assignment. It is very important to know this as a study of Pinto et al. (2012) found that approximately half of the expats indicated that they had accepted the offer for the international assignment as they felt pressured to do so.

3.2 Family

Organizations should also look at the family of the individual that is going along, as they can negatively influence the pre-assignment stage as for example dual-career couples increase the chance of a failed international assignment (Caligiuri et al. 1998; Harvey, 1998) and the presence of having preschool-aged children is negatively related to the willingness to relocate (Balridge et al., 2006). Even though the family can negatively influence the international assignment in this stage, this doesn't mean that organizations should only select potential candidates from employees without a family, but that the organization should be aware of the family. There are options in this stage that the organization can take to include the family in the international assignment, such as including the family or the spouse in the first meeting with the assignee to also give the spouse the opportunity to ask questions about the assignment. By including the family in a meeting such as the first, the spouse will be up-to-date on the assignment and knows what can be expected.

3.3 Preparation

In the pre-assignment stage once the right person is selected, the preparation for the actual international assignment can start. It is not only the employee that is getting prepared for the role, but also the home and host countries have to make preparations. In this stage the visa is applied for, social security and tax are being sorted. As mistakes can be made easily it is important that multiple individuals look at social security and tax, furthermore in certain host countries any additional documentation or insurances should be applied for. For example for registered expats in the Netherlands it is obligatory that they have a Dutch basic health insurance within four months of their arrival, even if the individual already has an (international) health insurance. By not complying the employee could risk a fine. This is an example of a factor that easily could have been tackled if the home and host country kept each other up-to-date and provided all details to each other in an early stage regarding the legislation and the assignment.

What is important in this step of the pre-assignment stage is that all stakeholders are up-to-date. For example if a line manager has selected an assignee for an international assignment and the assignee needs to be in the country within two weeks. However the line manager has informed the global mobility team only four weeks prior to this and obtaining a visa for that country takes 6 weeks. In such a case the whole process will be delayed which could result in financial losses for the firm.

Next to the administration side of the preparation for the international assignment, the employee should be prepared for the international assignment. This part of the international assignment could make-or-break an assignment, as the better employee is prepared prior to the actual assignment the bigger the chance is of the international assignment being successfully completed. When an employee leaves the home country almost all elements have changed in comparison to performing the former role in the home country. It is therefore important to make the employee aware of this and to inform them of what they can expect upon their arrival and during the assignment, as the more realistic expectations the expat has the better the expat adjust in the host country (Caligiuri et al., (2001). One of the most effective ways to reduce the uncertainty that may arise before an international assignment is undertaken is to send the employee on a pre-departure visit (Tahvanainen, M., Welch, D., & Worm, V. (2005). During this visit the employee can see how the host country and company look like, and will also be able to meet their new colleagues and if possible see

the new house. Another option to prepare the employee of what is coming is by giving the employee a cultural training, which can help the expat to learn about the culture of the new country. Furthermore in certain countries and for certain assignments it might be necessary for the employee to speak a certain language. In this stage of the international assignment this should be known for the organization. The employee's ability to speak the required language for the assignment could have been included as one of the selection criteria, however if it is not been and the employee has already been selected the organization can offer the employee language courses. As mentioned in the selection part of the pre-departure stage, the family is one of the most important factors influencing this stage and thus including family members in at least one of the above named options to prepare the employee will likely increase the success of an international assignment as the family members of the employee will also face some of challenges as the employee.

3.4 Policies

Most organizations have a policy in place for the long-term international assignments; in some organizations these are called long-term assignment policies, while in others these are called expatriate policies. These policies often tend to be general and can be seen as a one-size-fits-all policy, which includes general rights of the expat and services offered to the employee in all three stages of the assignment. However as the expat population is now more diverse (Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016), these policies should be made more flexible rather than being static to meet the needs of the expat. A possible solution to make the policies more flexible is by providing the expat with a budget, enabling them to choose which type of services they would like such as training and or coaching. Hereby the expat should receive some guidance.

3.2 Rejected employees

A part in the selection process which gets less attention in the literature is studying what organizations do or not do with the individuals that aren't selected for the international assignment, but did went through the whole selection process. In some cases it could be the employee that rejects an offer to go on an international assignment. The most given reasons for employees to turn down an international assignment are family concerns (37%), partner's career (19%) (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2014). Research has shown that once an employee decides not to go on an international assignment, the relation between the organization and the employee becomes less strong, furthermore it often also impacts the career of the employee in the company. In situations where the organization rejects the employee in the selection process, the employee often feels rejected, less motivated to work hard resulting in poorer performance. Also the self-esteem of the employee could go down. In certain cases the employee might even leave the firm. Even though this has nothing to do with the actual assignment, it is important for organizations to be aware of these individuals and the consequences rejecting individuals could have.

Chapter 4: Factors that can lead to an international assignment not being completed in the actual assignment

The second stage of the international assignment is the actual assignment. In this stage of the international assignment, the expat often experiences problems and/or difficulties in the personal and professional environment, leading to the international assignment being prematurely terminated. Some authors have described an international assignment that is prematurely terminated in this stage of the assignment, a failed international assignment. Cole & Nesbeth (2014, 67) have defined failure in this sense as the premature return of all members of an expatriate family to the nominated home country (“premature return”).

This chapter will provide a high level overview of the most important factors that could negatively influence an international assignment, resulting in an unsuccessful international assignment during the actual assignment. The sequence of the factors that are named in this chapter have nothing to do with their importance, all named factors could contribute to an unsuccessful international assignment during the actual assignment.

4.1 Culture shock

Once expats arrive in the host country they need to get used to the new working environment, new colleagues, the culture of the host country, cuisine, different system for healthcare and schooling for possible children. Once employees move to another country, especially in the first few months most things are new, exciting and interesting for the employee and the family. These first few weeks to months tend to feel like a honeymoon. However once this “honeymoon” stage is over reality strikes and the employee and the family could get a culture shock. Winkelman (1994) has described a culture shock as “the consequence of strain and anxiety resulting from contact with a new culture and the feelings of loss, confusion, and impotence resulting from loss of accustomed cultural cues and social rule”. If an expat or one of the family members keeps facing one of these problems associated with the culture shock and they are not quickly resolved, this could result in stress for the employee as there is often put a lot of pressure on the assignee to make sure that the family gets used to and feels at home in the host country (Harvey, 1998). This pressure can result in stress which in return can have a negative effect on the performance of the assignee and thus on the success of the assignment as it can increase the intention to leave the host country prematurely (Zhou & Qin, 2009). To reduce the culture shock organizations can provide the employee and the family, even still in the home country, with cultural training. Research has shown that providing future expats with cultural training, the culture shock will not be as big and the chances of the assignee completing the international assignment are increased. Other options that help the expat and the family to settle in the host country is by providing the expat with a (national) host buddy who can help the employee and its family get around the city and help them with practical matters. Research has shown that once expats have a contact with a national host this can have a positive impact on interaction adjustment (Bakel et al. 2011) and the more immersed the expat becomes in the host culture (Penke, 2016). If the host and the expat have some similarities in terms of characteristics or personality this can help.

4.2 Organizational support

Organizational support is important in the different stages throughout the assignment and does not only have to come from the home country but support can also be provided by the host country. Organizational support could already be something simple as keeping the communication between the home company and the expat open, by having frequent calls to for example keep the employee updated about changes in the home company. It is important that organizations realize that they can help and support the expat through the assignment. Especially in the start of the international assignment organizational support can be given by providing the expat with services such as housing assistance. Often once expats have arrived in the host country it is not clear for them whom to go to should they have any questions. Once expats have questions or stumble into something, they tend to consult their former manager or colleagues from the home country. Expats often also tend to consult other expats in the host company as they can easily communicate with their fellow expatriates. Expats not only do this in the host company, but also outside the company with other expats. For example expats meet other expats in the international schools where their children often go to, or expats could meet each other in expatriate clubs. Research has shown that once expats interact a lot with each other this negatively influences the adjustment (Parker & McEvoy, 1993) in the host country and company.

4.3 Family

Also in this stage the family has an important role and family concerns can lead to an unsuccessful assignment in this stage. Research has shown that family concerns can be one of the causes of failed international assignments (Cole & Nesbeth, 2014). For example if there is a family member in the home country of the expat that is (terminally) ill and the assignee and the family want to go back. Other options could be if the children of the assignee are not doing well in the school or cannot get used to the new environment in the host country. Unfortunately often in the just described situations there is not much that the organization can do.

4.4 Expat performance

When employees are selected for international assignments the organization assumes that the employee will be able to successfully complete the assignment. However situations could arise in which the performance of the expat isn't as expected. Research has shown that companies often do not have formal performance appraisals systems for the expats (Bonache et al, 2001), while situations could occur in which the expat is not able to successfully complete the assigned task (Stedham and Nechita (1997)). If such a situation occurs the organization should first try to find out what the reason is for this performance by among others talking to the expat and depending on the outcomes of this meeting the organization could look for solutions to solve the issue(s). The more frequent an performance appraisal could be held, the easier it will be for the organization to step in and guide and support the expat, leading to bigger chances of having a successful international assignment. These meetings with the expat could also be held by providing the employee career support. Expats that perceive to have received no career support have a higher intention to leave the organization. In certain cases the performance can be improved by offering training on-the job. However if both the organization and the expat are unable to solve the issue(s) a premature

termination of the international assignment might be necessary. In rare cases the organization might terminate an international assignment if they are unhappy with the steps that the employee is making. When such a situation arises this not only results in big financial losses for the company, but it also impacts the self-esteem of the individual and could have an influence on the career of the individual. Terminating an assignment could also result in the assignee leaving the company.

4.5 Premature return of the expat

Sometimes the factors that can influence an international assignment not being completed during the actual assignment have nothing to do with the company, as stated in paragraph 4.3 regarding the family. Other examples could be situations wherein the expat is headhunted by competitors and was offered better terms of employment. If an expat would be interested, the organization can often only offer the expat a better package if they are happy with the expat, and if they do not, they will lose the expat resulting in financial losses and costs for recruitment and replacement of the expat (Cole & Nesbeth, 2014). Organizations therefore often include in the assignment contract of the expat a section that states that if the assignment isn't completed, the expat has to pay back certain expenses if not all. By including this organizations try to minimize the chance of the assignee prematurely terminating the international assignment.

Chapter 5: Factors that can lead to the assignee leaving the organization at the end or within a year after the completion of the international assignment

The third stage of the international assignment is the post-assignment stage. This stage starts from the moment the expat has returned to the home country. This stage is often seen as the most difficult stage in the international assignment (Gregerson & Black, 1996; Adler, 2001). This stage should be given more attention from organizations as about one fourth of the expats leave the organization within a year (Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall, 1992; Stahl, 2009).

This chapter will provide a high level overview of the most important factors that could negatively influence an international assignment, resulting in an unsuccessful international assignment in the post-assignment stage. The sequence of the factors that are named in this chapter have nothing to do with their importance in this stage, all named factors could contribute to an unsuccessful international assignment in the post-assignment stage.

5.1 Reverse culture shock

When an assignee has returned from the host country the biggest part of the international assignment is over. Companies often tend to spend less attention to this stage of the international assignment as they believe that it will be easy for the international assignee to return back to the home country, as they already speak the language, know the culture, the company and the colleagues. However for the assignee often many things have changed, colleagues have other roles, the organization culture has changed (Hyder & Lövblad, 2007), while the employee often is placed back in their role prior to the assignment as most of the expats are guaranteed a re-entry position once they have completed their assignment (Stahl et al. 2002). Once employees are back in their home country a reverse culture shock could occur, leaving the employee trying to adapt back to the lifestyle, home and organizational culture. A reverse culture shock “is the process of readjusting, reaculturating, and re-assimilating into one's own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time” (Gaw, 2000). In order to minimize or prevent a reverse culture shock from arising organizations can provide the expat with a preparatory repatriation training to get used to the home country and home company. Also, research has shown that when expats have frequent visits to home country during the actual assignment and are able to maintain their relationships and stay acquainted with the culture of the home country and company the stress-levels about the repatriation process can be minimized (Black et al, 1992). Employees who returned to their home country from an assignment also tend to question themselves, their goals and their lives. Some might even make some drastic changes and move to other neighbourhoods and seek new friends. Research has also shown that a large part of the returned expats search for other jobs upon their return (Stahl et al. 2002) as they often felt disconnected from the home organization during the assignment (Kraimer et al., 2012). It is therefore important that the organizations keep contact with the employee during and after the international assignment to keep the employee involved and up-to-date.

5.2 Expectations about the return

Both the expat and the employee have expectations about the return on investment after the international assignment. For both the expat and the organization these expectations can change during and after the international assignment. Expats often already have their expectations about their situation in the home country after the completion of the international assignment when they accept an international assignment. Expats often tend to expect that the international assignment will be beneficial for their career, resulting in a promotion and or a higher salary (Black et al., 1992; Suutari & Brewster, 2003). However if both the organization and the expat are unaware of both of their expectations, of haven't shared their expectations it will be hard to meet these expectations. Research has shown that once expats have the feeling that their plans and expectations for their career do not match the plans of that of the organization, this could result in a higher intention to leave the organization (Granrose & Portwood, 1987). It is therefore important that the organization tries to manage the expectations of the employee before returning to the home country and starts managing expectations at the start of the international assignment, already in the preparation stage. When expats have returned to the home country they often tend to believe that the organization is interested in the skills and knowledge that they have gained on the international assignment and sees the employee as being more valuable, however this is not always the case. When expats notice this, they could be more inclined to leave the organization and look for opportunities where their newly gained knowledge is valued (Löfblad, 2007).

As organizations tend to look too at this stage of the international assignment, the expat is often left in uncertainty with regards to having and which position they will have upon their return (Bossard & Peterson, 2005). In order to minimize the risk of the organization of not having a position upon the return of the employee, organizations should start with career planning in the actual assignment stage.

5.3 Career prospects outside the home organization

Sometimes the reasons that could lead to an unsuccessful assignment in the post-assignment stage are out of the hands of the organization. An example of this could be the career prospects outside the home organization. Once expats returned from, and often also during, an international assignment they become more attractive for other companies, as the experience and knowledge that they have gained in the host country can be of immense value for these companies. Research has shown that 60% of the expats received job offers upon their return in the home country (Suutari & Brewster, 2003). These expats could be interesting for example if an organization is interested in setting up a branch in a country where they have no skilled employees in-house that are able to perform this task. These organizations could look potential candidates at their competitors or other organizations that either have a branch in that specific country or organizations that have sent expats to that country that have successfully completed their international assignment. Especially the expats on long-term assignments are attractive for these organizations as these expats have lived and worked for many years in the specific country and have gained a lot of experience and knowledge about that country and the working culture, which can be of immense value for this company that is looking for someone to set up their branch. Furthermore as these expats have completed their

international assignment, they have proven to be able to adjust to the host culture and country as they have overcome the culture shock. Also the family of the expat has had the time to get used to that country and build their lives there, while the family is one of the factors that could lead to an unsuccessful assignment in both the post-assignment stage and during the actual assignment. The home organization should be aware of the attractiveness of the expat to other organizations and make strategies and policies that motivate the expat to stay in the organization.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This purpose of this study was to contribute to the understanding of the factors that can influence the success of international assignments in the three stages of an international assignment; (1) the pre-departure stage, (2) the actual assignment and (3) the post-departure stage. The study aimed to answer the following research question:

“How can the success of an international assignment be increased?”

For this study a literature review was done in which factors that can negatively influence an international assignment and lead to an unsuccessful international assignment have been discussed in a high level overview. In this study recommendations have been provided that can either solve or minimize the risks of these factors contributing to an unsuccessful international assignment.

The recommendations of this paper can be summed as follows:

In order to increase the success of an international assignment organizations should select individuals not only based on their ability to perform the duties of the role, but on different criteria such as their ability to adapt, language skills and characteristics of the individual. Furthermore organizations should try to include the family in as much stages of the international assignment as possible, this should be done especially if there are dual-career couples to make sure that they are aware of what they can expect and assist the spouse if possible.

When it comes to the preparation of the international assignment, the success of an international assignment can be increased if all stakeholders are up-to-date. Also if the expat and the joining family members receive a cultural training course, language course and or are send on a preparatory visit to the host country the success of an international assignment will be increased as the expat and the family will have an idea of what to expect. Furthermore giving the employee some say in the policy by giving them a budget to choose which trainings and or coaching sessions they would like to receive to prepare themselves, the international assignment will also be more successful. Also organization support throughout the assignment will help the employee be prepared and adjust.

When the expat has arrived in the host country expats and their family members could get a culture shock, the risk of a culture shock can be reduced and minimized by offering the expat with a host buddy that can help the expat with practical matters. An culture shock could also be minimized by offering the expat and the family with cultural training. During the actual assignment, organizations should still be aware of the family and try to include supporting them. In this stage the performance of the expat could not go as expected. This paper therefore recommends having frequent formal performance appraisal systems in place as in the home country, so the organization has time to step in where necessary and support the expat if it's required.

In the post-assignment stage, the employee could get a reverse culture shock. Organizations should be aware that once employees return to the home country after several years, the employee needs to get used to the changed culture and situation of the company. This paper therefore recommends offering the expat frequent visits to the home country, so the expat can maintain relationships and being involved with the home company. Both the expat and the organization have expectations about the return of the expat to the home country, this paper recommends that the

organizations tries to manage the expectations of the expat by informing and keeping the expat up-to-date about the expected situation upon their return. Organizations should be made aware that there are other companies that are interested in the expats upon their return; this paper therefore recommends making strategies and policies that motivate the expat to stay in the organization upon their return to the home country.

Chapter 7: Limitations and future research

The results of this study are subject to a number of limitations. First, in this study only a few of the many different possible factors that could contribute to an unsuccessful assignment have been discussed in each chapter. When organizations want to adjust their strategy on international assignments to increase the success of them, organizations should be aware of this and should also look for other factors that could contribute to the success of an international assignment. Furthermore, interviews with both expats and the host manager could provide more factors that can contribute to the success of an international assignment. Also as in this study different factors have been provided which can contribute to an unsuccessful assignment, however these have not been provided in their level of importance. It would be interesting if for future research, researchers could clarify what the right sequence is of the contributing factors to a successful international assignment.

As this paper was based on a literature review study to provide a high level overview of the factors that could lead to an unsuccessful international assignment, for future research it would be interesting to replicate this study based on a quantitative or qualitative study. In such a quantitative or qualitative study, it would be interesting to investigate whether the factors that have been mentioned in this paper are still one of the most important factors that could negatively influence the success of an international assignment. More specifically, in-depth interviews with expatriates prior, during and after the international assignment could provide us with their vision on the factors that could lead to an unsuccessful international assignment.

For future research it would also be interesting if there would be a company in which the suggested solutions to the problems that could arise due to these factors could indeed lead to a successful international assignment.

Furthermore as the expat population has been changing and the expats that go on an international assignment are becoming younger, often under the age of 35, it would be interesting to do more research about this younger group.

As some scholars have indicated that there will be more short-term business travelers in the coming years, it would be interesting to see what they would need in order to accelerate in their role.

For future research it would also be interesting to see what the factors are that could lead to an unsuccessful assignment for the other types of international assignments as provided by (Kühlmann, 2014) in the three stages of an international assignment.

During the research for the writing of this paper, not many papers have been found that discussed the vision of global mobility teams on the factors that could increase the success of international assignments, therefore a study to find this out could contribute to the literature on international assignments.

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Appendix 1 Types of International Assignments

Assignment type	Duration	Contractual basis	Tax residence	Example
International Business Traveler	Up to 15 days	Home	Home	Meeting for signing a client contract in the US
Project Worker	Up to 90 days	Home	Home	Implementation and testing of a software in India
Construction Worker	Up to six months	Home	Home	Building an atomic reactor in Ukraine
Short-Term Assignment	Up to one year	Home	Host	Developing new business in China
Long-Term Assignment	Up to five years	Host (dormant employment with home or guaranteed right of return)	Host	Setting up a production site in Bangladesh
Local-to-Local transfer	Unlimited	Host	Host	Taking over a leadership role in the UK with the assumption of staying there during retirement.

Weinberger, A. (2014). The Global Mobility Workbook. Pg 21.

Fig-5: Types of assignments based on Kühlmann, 2004.