

Problems faced by women on international assignments



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The twenty first century is an era of equality in life and at work. Women are nowadays essential in most areas of managing business and engineering enterprises. Gone are the days when the certain jobs were identified as male dominated. These days women are working at all levels right from the shop floor to running the firm as CEO and chairman or should we say chairwoman. This trend is picking pace but an area where women face unprecedented problems is when on international assignments. One of the many contributing factors for such problems is the necessity to achieve the right work Life balance. The range of issues embraced by this term alone crosses disciplines and traditional boundaries. Various studies have been conducted in the past and this aspect is gaining importance due to numerous contributing factors such as globalisation, diversification and increased competition which has led to rise in the work pressure. At the same time more stringent employment laws are coming into force to ensure that the employees are well treated and are not subject to undue pressures at work. Thus companies are not only forced to assign women to international roles but also to ensure that they are comfortable fulfilling them. This situation is an appropriate example of a catch 22 situation and is analysed in this report using SWOT and PEST analysis. Methods of resolving these problems are discussed and recommendations given. To conclude the report forecast and expected outcomes are included to project the relative advantages and disadvantages of the recommendations given.

Terms of Reference

About the consultants

The author represents a firm of established and respected management consultancy, specialising in a wide range of effective and innovative Human resource solutions to clients in a wide domain of industries dealing in products and services. The firm delivers a range of customized services to meet the needs of increasingly growing customer base. The various activities undertaken by the firm are:

Offer expert advice and direct assistance to complement the client's business agenda.

Enable understanding of the key strategic and operational indicators, and helping to shape the clients business for future.

Designing and delivering business-centred solutions to a comprehensive range of Human resource related issues.

Provide support for the change management, in order to encourage innovation and effective problem solving.

Brokering partnerships with clients through facilitated and collaborative approaches.

About the Client

The client in this case is a leading IT services company. The company has a problem with the recruitment and retention of women and currently more women are leaving the company than are joining. This report, aimed at senior decision and policy makers for the client, will examine female

employment in the IT sector and the reasons why women are leaving the client at various points in their careers. A contributing factor to this trend is the assignment of women on international assignments and the problems faced by women when fulfilling their responsibilities on these assignments. The report will also assess current practices, such as flexible working to encourage work-life balance, in the IT and other sectors.

The purpose of the consulting activity

The client has chosen to take the services of the firm that the author represents to do an in-depth analysis of the issues faced by women in the firm and in particular of those working on international assignments. The reason for selecting the author's firm is the long standing track record of delivering solutions rather than reports and documents. In line with the previous consulting work taken by the consultancy, the client requires a concise report covering the overview of the problem, its analysis and the recommended solutions (Forester, 1999). The client expects the consultants to deliver a range of solutions and also project the relative advantages and disadvantages of the proposed solutions. The client will then choose a solution which it finds suitable as per its requirements.

Overview of the situation

The company aspires to be the employer of choice for IT professionals in the United Kingdom. It plans to achieve this by being an equal opportunity employer. The company has invested heavily to ensure that capable people irrespective of their gender, religion, ethnicity etc. are provided with training to ensure that they can be mobilized to participate in the activities at a

global level. Despite their best efforts, they are having a problem with the recruitment and retention of women. The current practices, such as flexible working, encouragement for achieving work-life balance, etc. are failing in wake of the demanding nature of the business as it involves working on international assignments (Scullion, 1994).

The company focuses on having an efficient and small workforce rather than employing in bulk for their needs. Therefore the company can not keep its female employees away from international assignments. In such a scenario, the company is losing on its profits as the women are not able to perform to the best of their abilities while working on international assignments. Many female employees have even resigned in the light of their demanding job and the company is facing a shortage of resources to complete the international projects.

To tackle this situation, the company has hired a leading firm of management consultants to tackle this problem. The company, or the client as we may call them, needs the consultants to analyze the problem to identify any scope of improvement that may help the firm retain the best employees and at the same time ensure that the problems they face on international assignments are taken care of.

Analysis of the situation

A critical requirement for such an assignment is consideration to culture theories, such as those of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner; Hofstede or Hall, etc. As part of the consulting project, the author has decided to

undertake both SWOT and PEST analysis to get a deeper understanding of <https://assignbuster.com/problems-faced-by-women-on-international-assignments/>

the problem. In greater interest of the client, the author has included a summary of the analysis tools and how they are used to analyze the issue.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner Cultural theory

This theory address a catch 22 situation of whether internationalization will lead to a common culture worldwide or should managers adapt their organization to the local characteristics of the market, the legislation, the fiscal regime, the socio-political system and the cultural system. This balance between consistency and adaptation is essential for corporate success.

Working women are a key human resource to most organizations in the western or developed economy, whereas in the east women are more or less restricted to domestic work, though this is changing gradually.

Therefore, when employing women on international assignments, the organization must consider the cultural situations of the country where the assignment is based. It is essential to make the structure consistent but it has to be done gradually. This theory is of great importance to this consulting environment as it has proven to be beneficial to an array of firms across sectors and industries such as Motorola, Royal Dutch Shell, Advanced Micro Devices, British Telecom, Applied Materials, General Motors, British Airways, TRW, McKinsey, A. T. Kearney, Unilever, IBM, Linde and Rockwell Automation. (Trompenaars et al, 1998)

Hofstede Cultural theory

This theory is a research-based theory of cultural differences among nations (Hofstede, 2010). It is highly statistical in nature and constitutes of five Cultural Dimensions which are explained as follows:

Power Distance Index: It is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. This represents inequality, but defined from below, not from above. It suggests that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. In a nutshell, 'all societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others'.

As expected, in the more unequal societies the balance of power is more inclined towards the elders and male members. In such a scenario sending women on international assignment in such society can prove to be disastrous as the society itself will not permit the women to exercise decision making power.

Individualism: It relates to the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. It has two extremities i. e. individualist and the collectivist. On the former side we find societies in which the ties between individuals are loose and everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. This is more prominent in western countries. On the latter side, we find societies in which people right from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive groups and extended families which continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.

Individualistic societies are better to work for women but at the same time beyond work they may feel loneliness. This may not be a big problem in <https://assignbuster.com/problems-faced-by-women-on-international-assignments/>

short term assignments but in long term assignments this factor needs to be considered for ensuring favorable working conditions.

Masculinity: refers to the distribution of roles between the genders which is another fundamental issue for any society to which a range of solutions are found. Studies reveal that women's values differ less among societies than men's values. The assertive pole has been called 'masculine' and the modest, caring pole 'feminine'. The women in feminine countries have the same modest, caring values as the men; in the masculine countries they are somewhat assertive and competitive, but not as much as the men, so that these countries show a gap between men's values and women's values.

This is a crucial factor as masculine or male dominated societies may present a hostile working environment to women sent there on international assignments. This may be totally different from the environment the women are used to in their regular working environment.

Uncertainty Avoidance Index: It deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. It indicates to what extent the members of a culture feel uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations.

Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility of such situations by imposing strict laws and rules. The opposite type i. e. uncertainty accepting cultures are more tolerant to opinions different from their own.

Therefore uncertainty accepting cultures are more suited to women.

Long-Term Orientation: It deals with the values associated with Long Term Orientation i. e. thrift & perseverance and the values associated with Short Term Orientation i. e. respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's 'face'.

This factor is of importance when we are choosing human resources for international assignments. Not only does the gender play an important role when considering this factor but also the society.

SWOT ANALYSIS

As the name suggests, it is a strategic planning method used to evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats involved in a project or in a business venture. The tool universally applicable and is therefore popular across academia and industry (Jackson et al, 2003). The SWOT in this particular case can be described as follows:

Strengths: Characteristics of the situation that results in advantage.

Women working on international assignments as the company can utilize the entire workforce and be flexible on allocating the human resources. Thus the processes are simplified and the organizational benefits achieved (Harris, 1993).

Weaknesses: Adverse Characteristics of the situation.

Employing women on international assignments comes with its own share of disadvantages too. The problem of adjusting to a new environment away

from family is more severe for women than for men. In case of married women or women with children, the problem is further aggravated.

Opportunities: Characteristics that may result in benefits both monetary and others.

Assigning women on international assignments can be more productive too. Sometimes routine work becomes too tiring and monotonous and international assignments work as a change for everyone and women are no exception to this (Harris, 2002).

Threats: Elements that could cause trouble for the business.

Despite its share of advantages and opportunities, international assignments also present a threat to retaining the best employees. Long term assignments may result in loss of motivation for the women employees and they may even resign to find a more stable and less mobile job. Especially married women and women with kids find it extremely hard to stay away from their families for long times.

Thus, Identification of SWOT is essential to ensure that the envisioned process may be successfully derived from them and any shortcomings addressed beforehand (Mathur-Helm, 2002).

PESTAL ANALYSIS

Another perspective of analysis is PESTAL, which is an abbreviation for 'Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal' analysis (Walsh, 2005). It works differently to SWOT as the factors of consideration

are different. But it goes without saying that they are dependent upon each other.

Political: These are the factors relating to how and to what degree a government intervenes in the functioning of a business. These factors include but are not restricted to tax policy, labor law, environmental law, trade restrictions, tariffs, and political stability.

Some countries propagate equality while others have severe laws against employing women. Therefore before sending the women employee to these countries, the organization must ensure that the political factors don't work against the employee.

Economic: These factors include economic growth, interest rates, exchange rates and the inflation rate.

Though these factors don't directly affect the proposition of sending women on international assignments, the company should ensure that the economic interests of the women employee are not affected negatively.

Social: These factors include the cultural aspects and include health consciousness, population growth rate, age distribution, career attitudes and emphasis on safety.

These factors directly affect women employees as they not only have to work during an international assignment with people from that country but also live in the company of locals. Therefore any social disturbances can badly affect their productivity.

Technological: These factors include technological aspects such as R&D, automation, technology incentives and the rate of technological change.

It is a widely acknowledged concept that technologically advanced places have a better perception and openness to women working in the industry. Therefore modern and technically advanced societies have better prospects for women on international assignments.

Environmental: These factors include ecological and environmental aspects such as weather, climate, and climate change, which may especially affect industries such as tourism, farming, and insurance.

Environmental factors have a great effect on the mental and physical health of all people and women employees are no exception to this. Therefore before assigning women to undertake international assignments, the organization must consider medical factors.

Legal: These factors include discrimination law, consumer law, antitrust law, employment law, and health and safety law.

Especially the discrimination and employment laws are of major concern when employing women to work on international assignments. Therefore these factors too should be taken into account during such assignments.

Solutions and recommendations

For the given problem, the author has considered various cultural theories and analytical tools to analyze the problem statement. Based on these

activities, the author recommends, the following solutions in no order of priority or importance:

Short term assignments: The firm may choose to send women only on short term assignments. It may be useful in smaller projects but in larger projects when the expertise of certain women employees is needed, it can be an adverse policy.

Assignments in specific countries: The firm may enforce a policy of sending women only to specific countries where the working environment is more favorable to the women. This may prove to be harmful to the idea of globalization and consistency as the employees may lose out on useful experience and exposure that they may apply in other assignments.

Benefits and support: The firm may choose to provide additional benefits and support to the women employees sent on international assignments. The firm has to decide that when offering these benefits, they should not violate equal treatment rights of their male counterparts.

Interview and feedback: Involve the women employees in the process of creating a better working environment when working on international assignments. This may be especially useful when we take their inputs as well as their feedback on the other solutions proposed here in.

Do not send women on international assignments: This may be an obvious solution to the problem but it may even lead to more problems in the future. The male employees may feel that their personal lives are not being given enough importance while the women employees may feel it to be a

stereotyped and prejudiced decision. Thus this solution, though very obvious is at the same time the most dangerous too.

Forecasts and outcomes

It is envisioned that the in depth analysis performed in this assignment will enable the firm to take informed decisions on assigning women to international assignments. The various suggestions made in the previous section have their own set of advantages and disadvantages. Further investigation including one-on-one interviews with the women employees in the firm needs to be undertaken to gain insights into this problem. It may so happen that the problem is not as grave as it appears on the outside. The women employees may themselves be able to suggest solutions that may enable them to fulfill their duties on the international assignment. The obvious solution of not sending the women employee on international assignments can prove to be a disaster as discussed in the previous section and is therefore not recommended. The author believes that a further investigation involving the women employees is necessary to ensure that the decision on the policy are in the best interests of both the firm and the employees.

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