

Expatriate Interview

Name:

BUS 540 Cross Cultural Management

Instructor: Dr Meckler

Date: 12/9/02

Overview

There are more and more foreigners that choose to work in Taiwan. According to the statistics, there are over fifty thousand foreigners that are working in Taipei, the capital of Taiwan, and the number is still increasing. Therefore, when this assignment came up and asked to do an expatriate interview, a person who is working or used to work in Taiwan became my target in interviewing.

Review of Theory

“Culture shock is the expatriate’s reaction to a new unpredictable, and therefore uncertain environment” (Adler, P 264) Nancy Adler made this definition about culture shock which will cause the frustration and confusion that result from being overwhelmed by too many new and uninterpretable cues. Adler used U-shaped curve to describe an expatriate’s adjustment when he or she enter a new country. In the first two months, expatriates have good moods because they are excited when they discover the new culture. Then about the third month, an expatriate’s good mood may go down. When fourth or fifth month, frustration and confusion bring their moods to the lowest bottom which is marked by culture shock. However, expatriates should view culture shock as a sign that they are doing something right, not wrong. They should

learn how to manage the stress caused by culture shock, not how to avoid the culture shock itself (Alder, 264).

Stress will occur when expatriates leave their home country to live in foreign country and new culture. Something such as separating from family and friends may result in increasing stress. Expatriates have some reaction when they feel stressed. For example, anger, disappointment, embarrassment, frustration, and impatience may arise. However, to reduce the stress caused by culture shock, Nancy Alder recommends expatriates to recognize stress and modify their expectations and behavior accordingly (Adler, P265). Participating in regular physical exercise, practicing meditation or relaxation techniques are some ways to help oneself deal with stress. Going to an international club, talking with another expatriates, watching some movies in one's native language are also helpful for expatriates to get a brief break of from the culture shock. Therefore, Nancy Alder pointed that the key to escape the culture shock low is cross-cultural appreciation and problem solving (Alder P266).

Research Questions

Living and working in another country can be difficult on the mental well being of an individual. In the course of this research project, one will be able to see how an expatriate is affected by a different culture. What kind of problems do expatriates face? How long does it really take for a person to get over culture shock? Questions like these will be answered in the course of this project.

Since I am an international student, going to school in another country, I can look at many of the phases that I went through during my stay in the

United States, and analyze them. One thing that I learned in my stay here, is that everyone, including some of my international classmates face culture shock in different ways. In the course of this project one will see and understand the cultural experience of one person, however it really is not representative of all or most people. What factors make a person less prone to culture shock? One will see throughout the project

Methodology

Interview Questions

Culture shock:

1. When you lived in Taiwan, in the first two months, what were your thoughts about the differences between Taiwan and the United States?
2. In your life in Taiwan, is there any culture shock you suffered which made a deep impression on you?
3. After living in Taiwan for one year, is there any different in you mind about culture shock compared to the first two months?

Communication problem:

1. In your working place, is language a big barrier when you communicate with your boss, co-workers or students? How do you solve this problem in different situations?
2. In your life, how could you face and solve the language problems with other people in society? Was it different from the problems you met in your work place?
3. Do you have any experiences when you are with a group and all of the people are communicating in Chinese, a language in which you are not

totally familiar with or can even totally understand? How do you face and deal with this kind of uncomfortable situation?

Data Sample

Andy Hockersmith is an enthusiastic English teacher. I met him in an English language center in Portland. Before teaching in Portland, he taught English in Turkmenistan for more than two years. To travel in different countries and absorb different cultural experiences through teaching English is his goal. One year ago, when he finished the contract with the language center he worked for in Portland, he accepted my suggestion of teaching English in Taiwan.

I chose to interview Andy because Taiwan is most familiar place to me. Thus, I might get the different feel about Taiwan from Andy's perspective, where it could also help me understand the thoughts of people from another cultures, when they look and evaluate me, a Taiwanese citizen.

Result Report

"When I first got to Taiwan last year, I was amazed by how crowded and busy the place was, especially certain parts of Taipei. I also couldn't believe how hectic the streets were - so many scooters and cars and pedestrian. And the driving style was so different from the driving style in USA." This is the first impression that Andy had about Taiwan. Besides living differences, Andy also noticed the differences in working and studying performance. "I felt like people worked more and students studied more than they do in the United States. At my school the students regularly put in more than sixty hours a week. Compared with students in the United States, that is a lot..."

About the relationship between people and people, Andy felt that people in Taiwan like to be close together. *“I felt like people in Taiwan did not mind being so close together. Comparing to my native country, people in the United States value personal space more, and tend to try to keep their distance from one another.”*

When I asked about his thoughts and situation about living in Taiwan for a one year, he said, *“After having lived here for a year, I feel like I have internalized everything a little more. I still feel like there are certain differences between the two countries; however, it generally does not bother me. Well, sometimes I don't like driving, but overall I'm pretty used to life here.”*

When we talked about the communication problem, Andy said, *“As far as communication problems go, language wasn't a barrier at all between the other English teachers and me. Their English is very good, as is that of my bosses.”* Apparently communication problems are not a problem in his work place. *“In fact, many of my co-workers (I'm the only foreigner) were educated at foreign universities, as were my two bosses.”*

However, the communication problems seemed happened between his students and him. *“Communicating with the students, however, is another story. In general I find that they are way, way, way too shy, and sometimes it drives me crazy. So many of them are so reluctant to even say their name in English, and it frequently feels like it would be impossible to actually engage them in a real conversation.”* He was told that a lot of this is cultural, that students are accustomed to listening to teachers and not asking questions or speaking out in class. *“I understand this. However, it does not mean that I accept it. I'm an English conversation teacher. My job is to teach conversation. I try to tell them not to worry about mistakes, that I just want*

them to speak whatever English they can, but it is real struggle getting many of them to talk.” To be a teacher and to teach students is his job. Apparently, he had serious problem on communication with his students and this problem resulted from culture difference.

When I asked him about the situation when he was in a Chinese group, he admitted that he felt uncomfortable. *“There have been plenty of times when I’m the only non-native Chinese speaker in a group of Chinese speakers. Many times I am with the other English teachers at my school at a social function or in the office. And during those times, they generally speak Chinese, which is understandable. After all, they’re from Taiwan. However, a lot of the time it makes me feel uncomfortable and awkward.”* He pointed out his key problem and I think it is also the main problem for most expatriates. *“I want to be a part of the conversation, but I just do not understand enough to keep up with them. And I do not want to tell them to translate everything for me, because that is boring for them.”* When I asked him how he could solve this kind of uncomfortable situation, he said, *“Sometimes I try to engage one or two teachers in a different conversation in English. Or sometimes I try to see how much Chinese I can understand. Or I just sit there trying to look like I am not bored. Generally I try to avoid those situations because I do not think there is any way for me to solve such situations.”*

Compared to group communication, Andy thought he did much better in one on one situations, where it is just one Chinese speaker and he. *“That way the person can gear his/her language toward my capabilities and we can understand each other. I really like these situations because I really do like communicating in Chinese. Plus it builds my confidence and helps me learn more so I can understand more the next time I am with a group.”*

Despite the many predicted and unpredicted difficulties, Andy eventually found his ways to face and solve them in his own ways.

Limitations

The person I interviewed had a job as an English teacher. Basically, a teacher is a little different career comparing to another jobs. To be a teacher, there is frequent contact with students, unlike a supervisor or colleagues. As explained in the previous section, between Andy and his coworkers there are not big problems. It is only he and his students where there are issues. However, for most expatriates, their lots of other stresses caused by a supervisor or colleagues, no matter culture shock or communication problem.

One must also remember that for Andy living in Taiwan was not the first expatriate experience. As I mentioned, he used to teach English in Turkmenistan for more than two years. Therefore, comparing to lots expatriates who did not have any experience about living in foreign country, Andy is more comprehensive and more prepared psychologically.

Finding Report

The first impression that Andy had about Taiwan indicated that he did not know what to expect when living in Taiwan, such as crazy traffic. During the initial period in a new culture, global managers often find that the society's behavior does not seem to make sense and that their own behavior does not produce expected results (Adler, P.264). This theory can be understood when Andy faced the traffic style in Taiwan. Busy is not only applied to traffic

in Taiwan, but also reflects the life style there as well.

However, people's relationship did not become constricted because of busy life styles. On the contrary, Andy felt that people like to be close together. For instance a coworker or student's family invites him to their house very frequently. He indicated this is very different than what he has seen in the United States. Many other differences still exist; however, to get used to the many differences is his mission and hopefully his achievement.

During the past year, I kept in close contact with him and found he got acquainted to the life in Taiwan very well. His story proved the theory Nancy Alder made, "After three to six months, most expatriates escape their culture shock "low" and begin living a more normal life abroad" (Alder, P.266).

Apparently communication problems are not a problem in his work place. It seemed he wanted to emphasize the communication problems with his students. Even though he was told that this is culture problem in Taiwan, he still cannot accept this explanation about the different ways that students learn and the different ways teachers teach. Regarding this problem, it is difficult to analyze. In Taiwan the education system is a cycle of memorization and paper tests. Thinking and discussing cannot help students' grades; that resulted in the dilemma Andy faced. Therefore, this is another form of culture shock for Andy. Andy should try to change students' behavior because; in many ways learning is not all about memorization and taking meaningless tests.

Communication problems did not happen in the work place, but that does not mean language problems did not exist between him and his co-workers. The theory of culture shock refers that the key to escaping the culture shock "low" is cross-cultural appreciation and problem solving (Alder, P.266).

However, from his answer, I felt deeply that in some situations problem solving or adjusting still cannot resolve problems. When expatriates face communication problems, avoiding or ignoring this kind of situation is the most common way for them to deal with it. From Andy's experience, therefore, it should be recommended that expatriates should try to create more one on one talking situations. This helps expatriates, not only improving their foreign language ability, but also reducing the uncomfortable feel created by culture shock.

Conclusion

Living abroad provides a great opportunity not only to extend the sights of another culture but also to explore your own values and attitudes and an understanding of the people, culture and traditions of the host country. Expatriates will also gain invaluable knowledge into how their specialized field is practiced in another country and on an international scale.

During the process of my interview, I can feel some of my thoughts were so close to Andy's. I am an international student; separated from friends, family and parents to come to United States to study is an important decision and it changed my life. I totally can understand what difficulty Andy suffered as I met here. No matter culture shock or communication problems, I have spent one and half years adjusting and adapting to American life, however, problems still exist in my life. Accepting a new life style just takes three to six months; however, completely blending into this culture may take five, even ten years. I am planning to stay in United States after graduating

and I believe there are still lots of lessons I need to learn in my continuing future as an expatriate.

Reference

1. <http://www.moi.gov.tw/W3/stat/home.asp>
November 1, 2002
2. Alder, N.J." Cross-Cultural Transitions: Expatriate Entry and Reentry"
International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior, 2002, P264-268