

Research update: female self-initiated expatriation

An important aspect of international human resource management in practice is, as we demonstrate in chapter 15 of the book, the use of staff on international assignments, or expatriates. There is growing interest in the experiences of expatriate staff, particularly women, who are often underrepresented on international assignments. Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh (2008) are concerned with the experiences of female self-initiated expatriates, international workers who move abroad to take up a position of their own volition, rather than being sent to a foreign location by their employer. Existing research indicates that women constitute a higher proportion of self-initiated expatriates compared with the conventional company-initiated approach.

Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh (2008) interviewed 10 female self-initiated expatriates who work in the Cayman Islands, a British overseas territory in the Caribbean. Career development was the main reason why the women opted to undertake self-initiated expatriation and work in an international context. The location was a further contributory factor, as was the desirability of initiating a lifestyle change. They did face some challenges, though, once they had taken up their positions. Difficulty in adapting to the prevailing work environment was the biggest problem, since the more relaxed work ethic was so very different from their previous experience. For the most part they coped by forming, and participating in, social networks outside of work, often with other expatriates. Generally, the women reported little gender discrimination; discriminatory treatment was linked to their identity as expatriates rather than as women. Efforts by the Cayman Islands government to ensure that indigenous workers are not excluded from the labour force, including the operation of a work permit system which limits most foreigners to a period of seven years' residency, produced feelings of anxiety among the self-initiated expatriate women. Respondents reported feeling 'scared to say anything', for fear that their work permit would be withdrawn, thus terminating their employment, and of 'living with some kind of threat over their heads' (Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh 2008: 167). Overall, however, any negative features of their experience as self-initiated expatriates were greatly outweighed by the positive benefits that came with working in an international environment, not least the potential for career development. The women viewed their

international experience positively, and thought 'it would benefit their career prospects and employability' (Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh 2008: 169).

Source

Fitzgerald, C. and Howe-Walsh, L. (2008). 'Self-initiated expatriates: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of professional female expatriates'. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 3/10, 156-75.