Preparing Expatriates to Work in Saudi Arabia

A Framework for Learning in High-Context Cultures

David Swanagon and Amy Simpson

Peabody College at Vanderbilt University

Advisor: Dr. Lacey Hartigan

July 30, 2023

Table of Contents

Organizational Context

For our Capstone Project, we have selected the American Chamber of Commerce in Saudi Arabia (AmCham) as our partner organization. Based in Dhahran, AmCham is responsible for cultivating business investment between the United States and Saudi Arabia, which we will refer to as "The Kingdom." The organization connects leaders, aligns policy objectives, and supports expatriates by providing professional networking and training. The project sponsor is Mr. Jesse Lapierre, Vice President for AmCham. He is a former United States Diplomat in Saudi Arabia.

AmCham serves a multifaceted group of stakeholders, including businesses and local governments. Members include some of the largest companies in the world such as Amazon, Exxon Mobil, FedEx, and Dow Chemical. Furthermore, US and Saudi government leaders actively participate in the chamber's ten sector committees, which comprise senior executives from companies with significant investments in Saudi Arabia. A fifteen-member Board of Directors leads the organization, and a seven-member executive team supports daily operations.

To operate successfully within Saudi Arabia, US business leaders must learn to navigate the cultural elements that underpin The Kingdom's values. For example, they must understand the Islamic calendar, the influence of the Quran, the role of tribal affiliation, and the importance of Sharia law in civil and commercial activities, as well as major economic initiatives. This acquired knowledge is essential for any American company conducting business within The Kingdom.

Problem of Practice

While the Saudi government sponsors learning programs to prepare professionals for long-term assignments, most expatriates receive training from their respective companies. AmCham

provides an onboarding program that emphasizes Saudi society and an introductory lesson in Arabic, among other topics important to members. To supplement this activity, companies focus on The Kingdom's history and information about social norms and Islamic traditions. According to AmCham, many companies focus their introduction on legal norms to ensure expatriates do not violate rules. This emphasis creates a compliance orientation of The Kingdom, which limits the development of other competencies.

This perception, coupled with the lack of culturally relevant training, creates challenges for communication and engagement between the expatriate and the local community. As a result, many expatriates have difficulty navigating Saudi Arabia's high-context culture. Obstacles include understanding the nuances of language, eye contact, power dynamics, and body language. As AmCham explains, these misunderstandings not only create conflicts within the workplace, but they also lead to dissatisfaction, lowered morale, and attrition among expatriates.

AmCham has quantitative data that show increasing job attrition rates, alongside anecdotal evidence regarding expatriate dissatisfaction and performance. AmCham feels that its partner companies desire a workplace environment that allows expatriates to develop more empathetic connections to members of the culture, experience a greater sense of belonging within the community, and increase their job satisfaction.

To foster this environment, we believe AmCham can help companies broaden their understanding of The Kingdom beyond facts, legal norms, and language lessons and build an onboarding program that helps expatriates understand the ways of working that drive contextual success. If companies foster this skillset, we believe that expatriate performance will improve, thereby enhancing the business opportunities available to both US and Saudi investors.

The Kingdom is experiencing rapid change, a fact that exacerbates these issues. Recently, the Saudi government expanded public entertainment venues, provided additional opportunities for women, and diminished the role of the religious police. As such, the historical norms that govern this society are evolving. Therefore, the ability of expatriates to successfully operate within those changes requires a thoughtful, culturally responsive approach.

The goal of this project is to diagnose the drivers of expatriate cultural adaptation in Saudi Arabia, with a particular focus on the contextual factors influencing onboarding success. Regarding potential biases, media portrayals of Saudi culture, alongside Americans' limited exposure to The Kingdom, impact the issue. The other challenge is that many still view Saudi Arabia as an oil and gas society, and, despite significant investments in other sectors, perceive that expatriates predominantly work in energy-related fields. Therefore, we anticipate that existing onboarding programs would likely apply that historical lens, which they must expand to account for other sectors and policy objectives. Our proposed onboarding program, therefore, must emphasize understanding of the current cultural and economic landscape rather than merely legal norms.

The key stakeholders are expatriates working in Saudi Arabia, American businesses that are Chamber members, employees of the Chamber, and Saudi business leaders. The team intends for the project to inform a new onboarding model for expatriates preparing to work in Saudi Arabia, emphasizing the activities that occur in the months prior to departure.

Stakeholder feedback shapes this iterative model as part of a continuous, formative evaluation process that emphasizes understanding. Using our project findings, the team developed a framework that AmCham can use for American expatriates relocating to Saudi Arabia. We hope that stakeholders will be able to easily adapt this framework to a variety of industries and

professional contexts within Saudi Arabia. To create this model, the project focused on pre-departure activities such as expatriate job design, recruiting, and onboarding activities rather than delving into Saudi-specific training more appropriate for post-arrival.

A key project challenge is data transparency and the contextual factors impacting its interpretation. Specifically, the literature indicates that communication within high-context cultures requires a significant amount of background information. Fundamentally, these societies are relationship driven. This means that social norms are personally reinforced rather than documented in writing. As such, onboarding tools such as manuals, operational procedures, and checklists are not sufficient. Furthermore, objective data that highlights trends in attrition, expatriate performance, and corporate performance is limited without incorporating context.

Review of Literature

To understand the key factors related to our problem, we reviewed literature concerning high-context versus low-context cultures, expatriate recruiting, and onboarding activities. Our search process included examining peer-reviewed publications using Google Scholar and Vanderbilt's Jean & Alexander Heard library system, analyzing trade journals for industries affiliated with AmCham, and examining benchmark data AmCham provided. The team also reviewed sources with the project sponsor to ensure that all chosen studies aligned with the cultural norms of Saudi Arabia. Our search emphasized the three stages of onboarding (i.e., job design, recruiting, and pre-departure activities) that occur prior to the employee's arrival in the host nation. This process included identifying theories that explained the expatriate experience, while examining the issue through multiple stakeholders such as recruiters and hiring managers.

The concept of legitimate peripheral participation is important for onboarding. Legitimate peripheral participation theory emphasizes the importance of newcomers progressing through a situated learning process that helps them acclimate to cultural norms, while gradually becoming full members. The interactions between newcomers and old-timers, alongside the rituals that anchor the community, are what drive learning outcomes. Learning involves increasing participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It concerns the whole person acting in the world. This means learning continuously evolves with experience.

For legitimate peripheral participation to occur, the literature suggests that the pre-departure phase should incorporate situated learning. This means emphasizing cultural rituals, connecting new hires with old-timers, and fostering continued feedback that drives meaningful learning outcomes. Though it is important to provide general information related to the host nation, pre-departure onboarding must also incorporate actual experiences that allow the expatriate to apply their knowledge. This may include in-country onboarding activities prior to starting the role (Bird et al., 1999; Freeman, 2020).

With the view that legitimate peripheral participation drives learning outcomes, our theoretical framework focuses on four factors that improve an expatriate's understanding of the community. Those include: 1) the difference between high-context versus low-context cultures; 2) expatriate job design; 3) recruiting procedures; and 4) pre-departure onboarding activities. Aligned with this framework, our literature review examines how each of these factors are influenced by an expatriate's behavioral competencies such as cultural awareness and emotional intelligence.

Factor 1: High-Context versus Low-Context Cultures

The work of anthropologist Edward T. Hall was pivotal. Specifically, Hall identified the key factors impacting high-context versus low-context cultures, which are important to increasing intercultural understanding, particularly for American business professionals overseas (Hall & Hall, 2001; Hall, E. T., 1960; Hall, E. T., 1963). He divided communication into three parts: "words, material things, and behavior" (Hall & Hall, 2001, p. 199). Within the behavioral piece, he identified a subconscious "silent language" that included "a broad range of evolutionary concepts, practices, and solutions to problems which have their roots not in the lofty ideas of philosophers but in the shared experiences of ordinary people" (p. 199).

According to Hall, citizens of a high-context culture, such as Japanese, French, Spanish, Italian, and Middle Eastern, share extensive backstory among networks of friends, family, coworkers, and acquaintances. In addition, their messages contain very little information because most of it is "context" that community members already understand. In contrast, a message within a low-context culture contains an abundance of information, primarily the result of fewer networks and a tendency to compartmentalize. For example, members of low-context cultures frame their relationships and interactions with coworkers as merely professional, having little overlap into their family, religious, or personal lives. In a high-context culture, these layers are inextricable. Citizens in America, Germany, and some European countries function as low-context cultures (Hall & Hall, 2001).

All cultures have shared characteristics that include patterns, values, symbols, beliefs, and expectations. To this point, culture exists across a spectrum with one side emphasizing explicit

communication and the other relying on implicit shared experiences. Culture is learned to assist society's social construction (Korac-Kakabadse et al., 2001). In low-context cultures, interaction depends on explicit communication. For example, supervisors tell subordinates precisely how to engage in topics. Comparatively, supervisors in high-context cultures expect their subordinates to understand without an explanation. In these environments, physical mechanisms such as tone, eye contact, hand gestures, and body language play a significant role in providing context for messaging (Hall, 1976; Korac-Kakabadse et al., 2001).

In Saudi Arabia, an example of high-context communication is the way Saudis approach the reduced work schedule during Hajj. Since leaders and employees are fasting, Saudis adjust work demands accordingly (e.g., meetings and project schedules). However, AmCham explains that companies make this adjustment without an explicit explanation to their employees. Comparatively, American companies adjust productivity through explicit means such as national holidays and bank closures. These differences can create conflict between high-context and low-context citizens. Those in high-context cultures become frustrated and insulted because they perceive their low-context counterparts to offer them unnecessary information in a manner they interpret as condescending (Hall & Hall, 2001). In high-context cultures, citizens expect one another to inherently understand based on their network of family and social contacts. Likewise, job assignments that expose expatriates to high-context situations require them to navigate "invisible barriers" deeply embedded in the host culture (Meyskens et al., 2009, p. 1448). As such, companies must engage in more onboarding activities to prepare their international workers.

Another useful lens to help individuals understand and navigate cultural differences between high-context and low-context cultures is the Hofstede Model. This model consists of six

dimensions that describe cultural characteristics that one can measure relative to other cultures (Hofstede, 2011). Although Hofstede did not apply his analysis to Saudi Arabia in particular, he did apply it to the Arab region, which included Saudi Arabia as well as Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, and the United Arab Emirates (Cassell & Blake, 2012; Shi & Wang, 2011). Among the six cultural dimensions are Power Distance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation, and Indulgence vs. Restraint (Hofstede, 2011; Beugelsdijk, Kostova, & Roth, 2017).

Within this model, the greatest disparity between the United States (low-context culture) and Arab countries (high-context cultures) occurs within Power Distance and Individual versus Collectivism (Cassell & Blake, 2012). Whereas the United States strives to minimize inequality, encourage collective decision-making, and uses a flat organizational structure, Arab countries respect authority and adhere to strict hierarchies. In addition, the United States rewards individual achievement and competition, which contrasts with the Arab world's focus on collaboration and tradition (Cassell & Blake, 2012). These characteristics have implications for American expatriates working in Saudi Arabia because they suggest sources of potential misunderstanding and conflict.

Although the Arab world and the United States have similar scores in their fifth dimension, short-term versus long-term orientation, for Saudi Arabia, this dimension and its relationship to the other dimensions carry significant weight. In other words, the indexes show that both countries prefer fast results rather than sustained, long-term efforts and slower results. They value national pride and individual stability, both of which the Hofstede Model categorizes as short-term values. However, in Saudi Arabia, unlike in the United States, other short-term values such as tradition, social obligation, and "preservation of face" take precedence over the bottom line. "Face" refers

to "favorable social self-worth that a person wants others to have of her or him" (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 187). "Preservation of face" is vital in Saudi Arabia; thus, understanding its importance is vital in cross-cultural understanding, communication, and relationship building (Cassell & Blake, 2012, p. 157). As a result, an American expatriate should avoid confrontation and pressure to meet deadlines because these actions will likely embarrass a Saudi national.

Factor 2: Expatriate Job Design

Technical-skill transfer and project-based support are the main reasons that companies initiate expatriate assignments (Cartus, 2007). However, companies should also examine the need for an expatriate, which would encompass several years, versus a consultant, which would require an assignment of one year or less. In determining the need for an expatriate to fill a role, the type of an assignment should be based on two factors: 1) the goal congruence between the parent and subsidiary; and 2) the similarity in work/life practices of the host nation relative to the expatriate talent pool (Meyskens et. al, 2009).

In situations where the parent and subsidiary have low goal congruence but similar work/life practices, an expatriate assignment would be ideal. However, if work/life practices significantly differ, these scholars recommend that the company use a commuter model that allows the expatriate to visit the host nation without relocation (Meyskens et al., 2009). These recommendations suggest that a key factor in expatriate success is talent and assignment matching. We believe that prior to identifying individuals, recruiters should understand the relationships between expatriate success, goal congruence, and work/life balance.

Personal agency and relationships are key factors that influence expatriate decisions and satisfaction. Family, spouse, and work/life balance heavily influence worker decisions for international assignments which companies initiate (Stahl et al., 2002). In fact, adjustment of the spouse is among the top factors in expatriate retention (Jackson, 2012). In addition, expatriates who initiate an assignment are more likely to have the motivation to work abroad than those for whom their companies initiated an assignment (Alshahrani, 2022; Isakovic et al., 2013). Additional studies have relied on social penetration theory to show that increased familiarity over time results in greater understanding and communication (Gundykunst & Chua, 1987). We believe, therefore, that an expatriate's early efforts to nurture relationships with members of the host culture will lead to improvements in communication and job success.

Factor 3: Recruiting Procedures

Our review suggests that expatriate assignments within high-context cultures require companies to conduct careful candidate screening. This process includes identifying individuals that have prior international experience, alongside a willingness to engage in new cultures. Furthermore, candidates with more professional experience demonstrated a stronger ability to adjust (Moon et al., 2012). For recruiting, we believe that hiring managers would benefit from identifying candidates with high self-initiated interest, alongside previous international experience (Isakovic & Whitman, 2013; Alshahrani, 2022).

In practice, this means companies should properly advertise the job posting in advance of the recruiting cycle. That way, internal and external candidates have a chance to review the opportunity and demonstrate their interest. Hiring managers could properly screen this interest

during the interview process. This approach is more favorable than hiring managers' selecting talent for development assignments, which runs the risk of logistical challenges interfering with long-term success. Once hiring managers select a candidate, it is important that they transition the recruiting process into a structured onboarding program. Since the first year is critical for long-term adaptation (Isakovic et al., 2013), organizations should align pre- and post-departure activities.

During the recruitment process, companies should assess candidates' behavioral competencies prior to assigning them to an expatriate role. Specifically, three factors positively influence an expatriate's ability to culturally adapt: 1) having high self-efficacy or willingness to view the assignment as an adventure rather than a burden; 2) believing that the assignment is a valuable means for personal and professional growth rather than simply a means to a promotion; and 3) appreciating the opportunity for continued learning for its own benefit (Bird et al., 1999).

Combined with the behavioral competencies detailed above, the literature also noted three psychological competencies that play a role in determining expatriate cultural adaptation. Those competencies included: 1) the drive to communicate; 2) the ability to establish non-work connections with locals; and 3) a willingness to maintain cultural flexibility. In addition, since expatriates typically possess the technical skills for the roles, recruiting and onboarding should not merely focus on professional competencies, but on building local connections and cultural flexibility (Black & Gregersen, 1999).

Expatriates must be willing to sacrifice their existing norms and beliefs to culturally adapt. This adaptation requires having emotional intelligence to assess the situation, determine the appropriate response, and adjust accordingly. During the recruiting and pre-departure period, it is

critical that the organization identifies individuals with these qualities and provide them with the

tools to apply unfamiliar cultural practices during the pre-departure period (Bird et al., 1999).

In terms of recruiting, additional factors impact expatriate cultural adjustment within

Middle Eastern high-context cultures, including prior success working as an expatriate and the

candidate's overall professional experience (Isakovic et al., 2013). These contextual items are

connected to the behaviors and psychological competencies listed above. However, they play a

disproportionate role as it relates to expatriate assignments within the Middle East (Moon et al.,

2012; Isakovic et al., 2013).

Factor 4: Pre-Departure Onboarding Activities

Pre-departure onboarding can positively influence work adjustment (Jochems, 2019) and

the absence of thoughtful onboarding can result in negative outcomes (Cuevas et al., 2011). The

literature emphasizes the importance of the pre-departure phase in helping the expatriate adjust

to three factors: 1) the general living conditions; 2) social interactions; and 3) work-related

challenges. At the core of each of these factors is context. Specifically, organizations should reduce

the uncertainty of these issues by fostering meaningful connections with local nationals,

integrating the spouse into the process, and addressing cultural awareness (Zhu et. al, 2016).

The challenge with pre-departure training programs is that these programs do not provide

a social frame for the expatriate to anchor against. In other words, the individual is not living the

experience when the programs explain certain cultural norms. Though it is important to provide

general information related to the host nation, pre-departure onboarding should also incorporate

actual experiences that allow expatriates to apply their knowledge, such as in-country onboarding activities prior to starting the role (Bird et al., 1999; Freeman, 2020).

Overall, the literature stipulates the importance of intentions and making connections during the pre-departure onboarding process. That is, expatriates should signal a strong intention to learn by practicing the language and engaging in unfamiliar cultural norms. Separately, they need to proactively make connections within the workforce and broader community. Another important element of expatriate onboarding is increasing the amount of social interaction between host country nationals and the employee, while incorporating the expatriate's spouse into the post-arrival activities. The key is to provide both job-related and social support (Dollwett, 2013). The organization should assist the expatriate with logistics, while emphasizing the importance of building friendships and connecting with the broader community. Overall, interactions with locals are a critical component in the onboarding process.

Additional components of pre-departure onboarding included providing the expatriate with coping strategies known as "strategic disengagement," "purposeful bonds," and a "contingency plan" (Asif et al., 2020, p. 801). Strategic disengagement involved brief escapes, such as shifting focus to personal projects as well as a renewed focus on the rewarding parts of the job assignment. Purposeful bonds included cultivating a network of other expatriates for support: "They rely on each other for swift information exchange and support each other blindly, without genuinely liking each other" (p. 802). Contingency plans involved taking steps to secure their future career: "You need to prepare an alternative plan, in order to not fall flat on your face" (p. 802).

The Molinsky Global Dexterity Model, or the "My Way, Your way, Our way" model (Molinsky, 2013) revealed ways in which professionals can cross-culturally adapt, and suggested ways that organizations can build the dexterity competency (Stensberg, 2021). This model focused on a "cultural agility" mindset as opposed to memorizing cultural facts (Stensberg, 2021, p. 126). It also emphasized the need to recognize the unique culture of an organization as well as the globalization of individuals.

Ultimately the model provides a six-point cultural inventory that considers 1) straightforward communication; 2) emotion; 3) respect; 4) assertiveness; 5) self-promotion; and 6) personal disclosure. Most importantly, this model creates a way for expatriates to understand their own cultural responses, consider these responses within the context of the host country's culture, and then choose a response that is not only appropriate but that aligns with their own values.

Others explored the origins of inter-cultural conflicts, such as gender, religious, and culturally inappropriate topics, to help prepare expatriates to avoid these obstacles (Palmer, 2015). Issues that arise include contact between genders, feedback on work that might translate as offensive or discouraging, or differing interpretations of eye contact or body language. Additional conflicts occur when expatriates appear to disrespect religious customs.

Face-negotiation theory can inform intercultural conflict training (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). In other words, while members of all cultures have a sense of face or self, specific cultures have different nuances among interpretations of this concept. Some have widely disparate relationships between the private and public self, while members of some cultures perceive them to be more closely aligned. Training that builds greater understanding of conflict goals and ways to

honor the other party in a conflict without attacking the other's self can improve communication and conflict resolution. Hofstede's model, as it distinguishes individual from collective-focused cultures, helps inform the basis of understanding (Hofstede, 2011); thus, training can incorporate modeling facework interaction skills and social responsibility.

Individual and environmental factors determine the ability to deal with change, handle logistics, and manage diversity; furthermore, perceived organizational support during the onboarding process increases employee resilience. That said, perceived organizational support mediates employee resilience, which in turn moderates employee engagement. This happens because employees feel motivated to learn and experiment because the organization has demonstrated a willingness to support them, even if they fail to initially perform. The combined effect is a reduction in turnover (Davies et. al, 2019; Eisenberger et al., 1986).

It is important for companies to build resilience among their expatriate employees by fostering a culture of flexibility. Individuals should be allowed to learn, while feeling supported by their leaders throughout the process (Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002; Stavely, 2018). Connecting to this idea, pre-departure onboarding should incorporate positive messaging from the hiring manager, senior leadership, and human resources about adaptation (Hadeed & Henry-Campbell, 2021). Expatriates should feel they have support to learn the social norms of their host country, especially within a high-context society.

Mentoring plays a significant impact on the onboarding of expatriate employees (Bozionelos, 2009; Muhamad, 2022). Specifically, the goal of the onboarding program is to reduce the stress and uncertainty of the new employee relative to the company's policies and procedures.

Expatriate assignments exacerbate this issue when employees must learn cultural context alongside the business practices of the parent's subsidiary.

To mitigate these challenges, the literature recommends adding a structured mentoring program to the onboarding process. As part of this practice, it's important to incorporate the spouse into the cultural adjustment, focusing on the practical aspects of relocation, alongside the social norms specific to the host nation (Stanek, 2001). In some studies, living-related challenges and family needs emerged as important contributors to expatriate adjustment (Zawawi & Al-Rashed, 2020; Tung, 1987).

Overall, the literature stipulates the importance of intentions and making connections during the onboarding process. That is, expatriates should signal a strong intention to learn by practicing the language and engaging in unfamiliar cultural norms. Separately, they need to proactively make connections within the workforce and broader community. After the recruiting and pre-departure period has allowed hiring managers to identify individuals with a strong sense of self, an onboarding program should provide them with the tools to apply unfamiliar cultural practices during the pre-departure period (Bird et al., 1999).

Expatriates on assignment in Saudi Arabia face cultural barriers that employers can both anticipate and mitigate. While job design and a clear reason for placement are important first steps, employers can go further to ensure a successful transition. They can choose candidates who not only have the requisite professional skills and prior international experience, but those whose temperaments are compatible with Saudi Arabia's high-context, face-saving culture. Once they hire suitable candidates, organizations can prepare them with a carefully designed pre-departure onboarding program that includes families, particularly the spouse.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1–AmCham Conceptual Framework
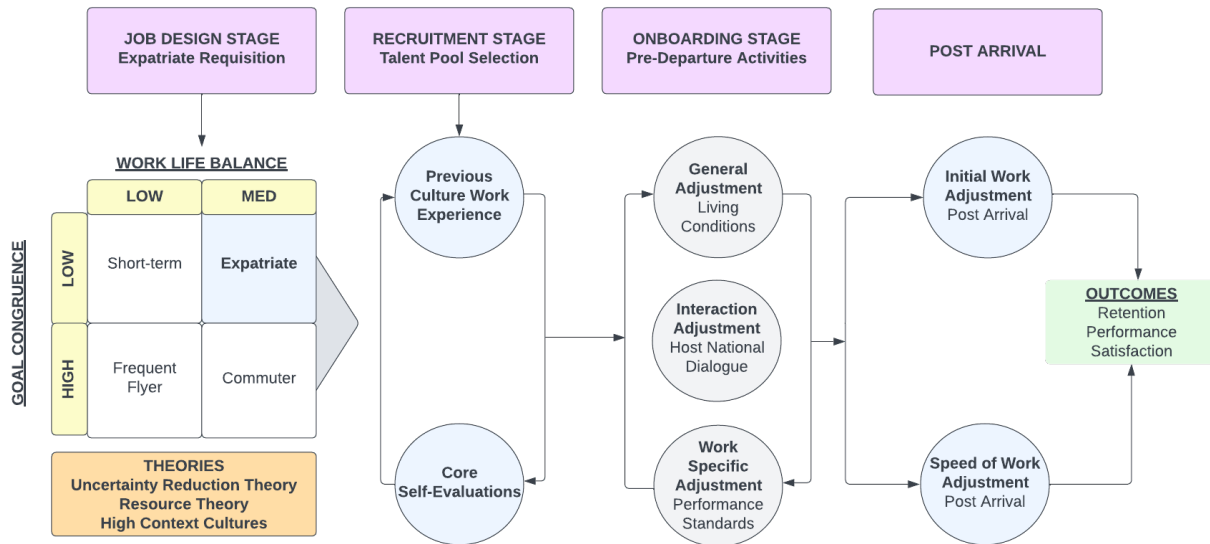
We relied upon the following concepts to develop the project's theoretical framework: the difference between high-context versus low-context cultures (detailed in our literature review above), uncertainty reduction theory, resource theory, and expatriate adjustment factors (see figure 1). The team divided the conceptual framework into three stages of onboarding. The first stage focuses on expatriate job design (Meyskens et al., 2009). The second stage emphasizes recruitment, whereby hiring managers evaluate technical and behavioral competencies needed for a candidate to be successful. The third stage concerns pre-departure onboarding. This stage focuses on activities that help reduce the uncertainty of selected candidates (Zhu et al. 2016).

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

In addition to motivation, a key success factor concerns the ability of the expatriate to culturally adapt. Uncertainty reduction theory suggests that adjustment follows a U-Shaped curve

(Berger & Calabrease, 1975). During the initial phase, learning is accretive and the worker experiences high engagement interacting with the host nation. After this stage, a significant drop in productivity occurs as new interactions occur requiring more context. The final stage sees a rebound as the expatriate develops new skills.

A key to successful onboarding is the reduction in uncertainty. This theory suggests that expatriates will adapt the more their uncertainty related to a cultural interaction decreases. This occurs through multiple direct experiences that teach the individual how to communicate and respond. To this point, the literature suggests that the U-Shaped curve can be positively reduced by selecting expatriates with previous cultural experiences (Zhu et al., 2016).

Resource Theory

Resource theory builds on uncertainty reduction theory by introducing the role of core-self evaluations. Expatriates who engage in reflective practice build resources that help them respond to the external environment. Beneficial responses include recognizing skill gaps, identifying cultural strengths, and building key relationships with members of the host country (Leiva et al., 2018; van Bakel, M., 2019). Furthermore, core-self evaluations help improve motivation by aligning individual goals with the assignment's situational context (Hobfoll, 2002). Taken together, prior cultural experience, alongside core-self evaluations, helps reduce uncertainty in expatriate interactions. This reduction in uncertainty has emerged as a key success factor in optimizing the U-Shaped adjustment curve that occurs during onboarding.

Expatriate Adjustment Factors

Another topic pertaining to expatriate onboarding is cultural adjustment, the factors that influence the ability of expatriates to adjust to the host country's social norms. The literature acknowledges a positive relationship between cultural adjustment and job satisfaction (Little, 2019). We identified three stages of expatriate adjustment, all of which the onboarding process influences: 1) general adjustment; 2) interaction adjustment; and 3) work adjustment. The general adjustment deals with the degree of satisfaction that expatriates have for the host country's living conditions. The interaction adjustment focuses on the psychological comfort the expatriate has towards communication with host country nationals. The work adjustment emphasizes an individual's alignment with the company's work values (Black et al., 1991; Saquib et al., 2019; Khalil et al., 2016; Bhuian et al., 1996; Tung, 1988; Jackson, 2012).

Project Questions

AmCham wants to explore the connection between expatriate job design, recruiting, and onboarding for Saudi Arabia's high-context culture. The goal is to assist member corporations in understanding what specialized recruiting and onboarding activities they should use for American expatriates. We believe that high-context cultures require enhanced learning programs to prepare expatriates because of the different cultural, political, and governmental norms of those societies relative to the United States.

The project questions follow a sequential flow (see Table 1). The first question focuses on job design and placement, while questions two and three evaluate the factors that influence

recruiting and onboarding activities. Question four deals with key stakeholders, emphasizing the critical relationships that are important during pre-departure.

Table 1–Project Questions

No.	Question
Project Question 1	Given Saudi Arabia's high-context culture, how do recruiters determine whether a particular job assignment requires an expatriate?
Project Question 2	What personal and professional factors do recruiters consider when matching expatriates to job assignments in Saudi Arabia?
Project Question 3	What professional competencies, behaviors, and cultural knowledge ensure success as an expatriate?
Project Question 4	Which key stakeholders most productively contribute to expatriate long-term success and in what ways?

Project Design

Data Collection Methods

The data collection process consisted of three steps. First, we collaborated with the AmCham sponsor to design an onboarding survey. AmCham collected responses anonymously and did not record emails. Second, AmCham provided us access to the data temporarily to complete the secondary analysis. Third, the AmCham sponsor selected ten stakeholders for interviews with

the project team participating in the interviews. The stakeholders were American expatriates that had significant experience working in Saudi Arabia. The team used the interview protocol during each session and encouraged each participant to provide additional context, as needed.

Onboarding Survey

We developed the survey based on our literature review, conceptual framework, and conversations with the AmCham sponsor. The survey focused on the three stages of expatriate onboarding: 1) job design, 2) recruiting procedures, and 3) pre-departure training programs. The survey used a five-point Likert scale, a comment field that allowed for generalized suggestions, and a question consenting to the data analysis.

To start the survey, we asked participants to stipulate their job role, company size, and industry background (see appendix 1—survey). In the first section, the questions asked participants to identify the factors that needed to be in place to justify an expatriate role. This included the length of the assignment, the type of skills required for the role, and the importance of using a standardized checklist (see appendix 1—survey). These questions aligned with the conceptual framework by examining the processes that are used to determine whether an expatriate is needed for a role. The second section dealt with recruiting practices, emphasizing the use of psychometrics to evaluate an expatriate's cultural flexibility and emotional intelligence. This section also examined the importance of language skills and prior experience in The Kingdom (see appendix 1–survey). The third section measured pre-departure training. Questions focused on the importance of cultural awareness training, alongside the need for a mentor to be assigned, and whether

expatriates should begin interacting with local nationals as part of pre-departure activities (see

appendix 1–survey).

The sponsor distributed the survey to a total of 50 AmCham members during March 2023,

collecting a total of 37 responses, which represents a 74% response rate. AmCham utilized a holistic

recruitment process that included sourcing participants from a variety of industries and

professional backgrounds (i.e., recruiters, mentors, and hiring managers). AmCham then provided

the survey data, excluding all personally identifiable information, temporarily to the project team

to complete the secondary analysis. AmCham revoked access at the conclusion of the project.

Stakeholder Interviews

Once we completed the secondary analysis of the survey data, we proceeded to the

interview protocol. We used four standardized questions during each interview (see Table 1–

Project Questions). The first question dealt with the job design and recruiting stages of the

conceptual framework. The goal was to identify which job requirements, competencies, and

behaviors were needed to justify an expatriate position. This information was compared to

questions one through three on the AmCham survey. We asked follow-up questions in situations

where the response deviated from the AmCham survey findings. If responses aligned with the

AmCham survey, we asked clarifying questions about why a particular experience, competency, or

behavior was critical.

Questions two and three focused on the competencies and behaviors that are needed for

an expatriate to succeed in Saudi Arabia. Question four dealt with the type of stakeholders that

should be involved in the onboarding process. This question was compared to the mentoring question on the AmCham survey.

For the stakeholder interviews, AmCham selected a diverse set of participants including recruiters, hiring managers, and mentors. The sponsor nominated stakeholders based on their professional expertise, recruiting experience, and knowledge of The Kingdom. The participants included leaders in the oil and gas, manufacturing, and chemicals industries. Likewise, each of them had previously worked in The Kingdom (see Appendix 3–interview participants). The breath, depth, and quality of their experiences provided the context needed to address the survey themes related to job design, recruiting practices, and cultural awareness. Consistent with IRB guidelines, we conducted all stakeholder interviews with Americans. We interviewed no Saudi citizens. We conducted the interviews remotely using the Zoom platform with participant consent. We used Otter AI to transcribe the sessions.

Data Collection Challenges

IRB guidelines limited the type of stakeholder interviews that the team could conduct; therefore, the ten interview participants consisted entirely of American expatriates. Though their expertise was significant, the fact that no Saudi citizens were included in the stakeholder pool was important. Ideally, AmCham should conduct additional interviews of this population to compare the American's responses with the Saudi nationals' responses. Differences between the two may elicit further areas of emphasis when addressing onboarding. These differences could include communication and expectation gaps, which employers could incorporate into pre-departure activities. Separately, the AmCham survey collected 37 responses. This response rate provided a

meaningful signal on key trends. However, a more robust participant pool would be needed to fully

validate the findings. Furthermore, only six percent of respondents were recruiters. Additional lines

of inquiry should emphasize this job category.

Data Analysis

Figure 2–Coding and Calibration Process
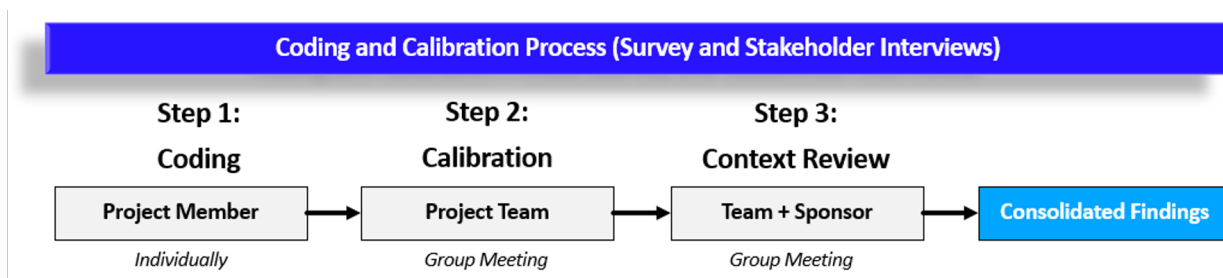
As outlined in Figure 2, we used a structured coding and calibration process to analyze

the survey and stakeholder interviews. First, each team member independently examined the

AmCham survey and developed a list of themes. Then, we held a calibration session to determine

which themes were present in each team member's analysis. We consolidated the recurring

themes into a preliminary findings report. After that, the team conducted a contextual review

with the project sponsor to ensure that the preliminary findings accounted for Saudi Arabia's

social context. We cataloged all adjustments as part of developing the final list of

recommendations.

The team followed the same process for the stakeholder interviews. After obtaining

consent from the participants, we transcribed interviews using Otter AI. From the transcripts,

each team member conducted an individual coding process in which we identified recurring

themes and linked topics to the conceptual framework. From this point, we held a calibration session to review the key themes and determine whether we had successfully mapped each interview. As part of aligning the transcripts to the conceptual framework, the team debated topics that were considered outliers (i.e., unique comments relative to other participants).

Once we completed the calibrated transcripts, we conducted a review with the project sponsor to ensure that we had accounted for contextual items impacting The Kingdom. After that, we developed a consolidated list of themes that accounted for the survey results and the suggestions from the stakeholder interviews. We compared key themes against the conceptual framework to determine whether best practices had emerged from the literature. We discussed a list of potential risks, emphasizing the future of expatriate onboarding. These risks included the generational shift towards Millennials, the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in recruiting expatriates, and the need for sustained L&D investment to support onboarding activities. The calibration discussions occurred in an iterative fashion. Once the project team and sponsor agreed, we generated a consolidated list of findings and recommendations.

In terms of the contextual review, the project sponsor examined the coded themes in relation to two factors: religious and tribal affiliations specific to Saudi Arabia. The first factor evaluated the religious calendar emphasizing the Eid, Hajj, and daily prayers. We examined this lens against interview responses that emphasized productivity. During the year, there are religious periods that temporarily lower productivity in The Kingdom. This is a high context, "widely understood" factor that impacts expatriates living in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, any interview responses that address productivity should account for the religious calendar.

The second factor dealt with the differences between Sunni and Shia tribal affiliation. The former is the majority population in Saudi Arabia, while the latter comprises the majority in Iran. Both tribes are part of the Saudi community, but differences exist that create competition. During the interviews, the sponsor recommended incorporating tribal affiliation in the cultural awareness training that occurred during the pre-departure stage.

Findings

Findings Related to Project Question 1: *Given Saudi Arabia's high-context culture, how do recruiters determine whether a particular job assignment requires an expatriate?*

- 1a: Needs a world class skill set that is unavailable locally;

- 1b: Adds value to the organization in a way that reflects cultural awareness;

- 1c: Trains a local replacement;

- 1d: Emphasizes skill transfer;

- 1e: Requires a multi-year commitment.

Our first project question reflected the Job Design phase of our conceptual framework: According to our interviews, we found that an assignment best fits an expatriate when it requires a skill set unavailable in the local talent pool that will add value to the organization. One participant said that an expatriate should bring "the highest level [of] world class quality. That's whether that's quality of thought, quality of project management, quality of management, or stakeholder engagement." Although we framed our question in terms of high-context culture, the responses did not overtly mention that component. It did, however, contribute in a meaningful way in subsequent questions.

One participant emphasized that the expatriate should add value "in a way which does not transgress." He elaborated further:

"You may achieve some great results, but if you do it at the expense of either cohesiveness or if you do it at the expense of creating annoyance or difficulties within the business, then clearly that has less of an advantage. It's got to be about adding value, but it's got to be about adding value in the right way."

After discussing this response during the calibration meeting, the "right way" dealt with the issue of cultural awareness. Specifically, the project sponsor noted, "People often think preparing for international assignments require checklists for success. However, in reality it's an iceberg." This statement reflects the underlying context that drives The Kingdom's interactions. The ability of expatriates to assess what is needed is a key success factor. The "right way" is indicative of an emotionally intelligent person that can adapt to cultural requirements. Furthermore, this situation also reflects the Legitimate Peripheral Participation noted by Lave & Wenger (1991). Specifically, newcomers to The Kingdom must learn the context to progress in their understanding of the community. The interactions with locals help them learn what the "right way" means.

Several participants mentioned the importance of training a local replacement. One participant called it the "number one objective of any expat assignment." Another put it simply: "My success would be . . . I delete myself from that role and I replace myself with a local guy." Survey data also emphasized the importance of identifying a local successor and showed that although assisting an expatriate is important, AmCham members believe that expatriates should also be mentoring their replacement. Eighty-six percent of survey respondents supported this approach (see appendix 1—survey).

Not everyone, however, agreed on the timeline. One survey respondent recommended that AmCham companies identify the local successor at the same time as hiring the expatriate. Then, the companies should match the two employees together from day one to ensure continuity. In contrast, another interview participant, who had spent much of this career in an expatriate human resources role, expressed caution:

"I'll be honest with you. I don't think that's a very workable solution, and I'll tell you why. [The person] tagged as your successor, that's a long time for them to wait. They can be very impatient. And there's a point where they can be undermining you because they want to move faster and take your role sooner, not knowing all they need to really learn."

This participant suggested the company identify a replacement only when the expatriate assignment is short-term, or within "less than a two-year cycle."

Survey data also showed that respondents believe the goal of an assignment is to serve Saudi Arabia's interests, not to develop the career path of expatriates. Instead, companies should provide expatriates with a salary premium to access, deploy, and transfer their skills. The knowledge transfer component is an essential aspect of an expatriate's role in Saudi Arabia, a philosophy which AmCham members believe employers should incorporate into the pre-departure onboarding process (see appendix 1—survey).

Overwhelmingly, respondents emphasized that organizations should consider whether an assignment requires a short-term consultant rather than an expatriate. For example, 92 percent of survey respondents stated that an expatriate role should be a multi-year commitment. We validated this information during the stakeholder interviews. The follow-up questions noted that expatriates needed the length to justify relocating their family to a new country.

Findings related to Project Question 2

What personal and professional factors do recruiters consider when matching expatriates

to job assignments in Saudi Arabia?

- 2a: Seek those with curiosity, extroversion, flexibility, patience, understanding, and

  emotional intelligence;

- 2b: Use psychometric assessments to make hiring decisions.

The second project question aligned with the Recruitment phase of our conceptual framework: Stakeholder interviews indicated that recruiters should consider the following personal characteristics when matching expats to job assignments in Saudi Arabia: curiosity, extroversion, flexibility, patience, understanding, and emotional intelligence. One participant elaborated, explaining that Saudi nationals receive extroversion best because they perceive the expatriate to be actively listening. In contrast, expatriates working in Oriental cultures experience less conflict when they are more introverted: "The reality is that not every expat manager is suitable for every country." Several claimed that an organization should consider the candidates' sensitivity, adaptability, and ability to listen. They mentioned humility and "no signs of arrogance" as important attributes. One stakeholder recommended a "high level of tolerance for ambiguity" and the awareness that Saudi is a "saving face culture."

Some stakeholders endorsed using psychometric assessments and personality assessments when placing expatriates: Two stakeholders recommended a particular instrument, the OPQ32, which analyzes 32 "dimensions" of personality that fall within three categories: relationships, thinking style, and emotions. He said that to his knowledge, companies in Saudi Arabia do not currently use this or any other assessment to screen potential expatriates, but he insisted that it "is one of the best out there" and "should be very powerful" if it were used (see appendix 1–survey). Eighty-seven percent of survey respondents noted that emotional intelligence was a critical competency. The stakeholder interviews validated this claim by highlighting examples where emotional intelligence was needed to adapt. An example was visa processing, where expatriates must complete several difficult steps to activate their residency. This process is a relationship driven

exercise, which requires emotional intelligence. Interestingly, although a large number recognized emotional intelligence to be critically important, they considered assessing this characteristic to be important but not critical.

Findings related to Project Question 3

What professional competencies, behaviors, and cultural knowledge ensure success as an

expatriate?

- 3a: Prior global experience;

- 3b: Capacity for relationship building;

- 3c: Understanding of Saudi's corporate hierarchy.

The third project question also aligned with the Recruitment phase. Some participants noted that prior global experience is helpful, but not as important as personality traits, leading some of our findings for this question to overlap with those of the prior question. Several participants pointed out that although most expatriates had the technical expertise to fulfill a role, many lacked the emotional maturity to thrive within the high-context culture. One participant used the term "polite tenacity" to describe a successful method of interacting with Saudis: "You know, come in, drink some tea, you know, relationship build. Be nice but push in a way that you can see success and not get too frustrated."

Another common theme that emerged was the importance of understanding the rigid hierarchy within most Saudi organizations. Whereas many American professionals were accustomed to contributing their ideas and input into the organization's objectives, expatriates working in Saudi Arabia often found the top-down hierarchy stifling. As one participant stated, "that could be a real jolt for someone who's used to, you know, a very even playing field, linear decision-

making processes to then come into a situation and just be told, this is what it is." He noted the ambiguity between personal and professional traits, stating, "I don't know if it's a cultural characteristic or if it's a corporate characteristic."

Findings related to Project Question 4

Which key stakeholders most productively contribute to expatriate long-term success and in what ways?

- 4a: Hiring managers, providing clear description of assignment with clear objectives;

- 4b: Onboarding personnel, offering training regarding face-saving culture and one-direction communication;

- 4c: Help desk, assisting with nonworking logistics;

- 4d: Hiring managers, providing interest inventories to build micro-communities;

- 4e: Onboarding personnel, incorporating the spouse into all activities.

Our final project question aligned with the Onboarding phase of our conceptual framework. Interviews suggested that the organization can best help expats in five different ways. First, respondents felt the organization should provide a transparent description of the assignment with clear objectives: "The better you can help make the objectives crystal clear and what you're wanting to accomplish and that it's connected. . . to the wider organization, how is what you're doing contributing to the greater good of what we're trying to do, and how do you fit into the equation, why is what you're doing important. . . can be conducive to a successful assignment." In addition, survey respondents noted the importance of providing a realistic job preview. One interview participant, however, suggested that organizations should limit transparency because "some folks, if you show them too much, they might not actually take the role." (see appendix 1—survey).

Second, interview participants noted the importance of creating an understanding of Saudi Arabia's face-saving culture and one-direction communication. Eighty seven percent of survey responses supported this finding and showed that AmCham companies do not fully articulate the challenges associated with living in Saudi Arabia. While some interview participants noted that cultural faux pas were not nearly as important as many believed, they also noted that "it's crucial for people who are leading teams to have a deep understanding of the culture and to be able to give that kind of support and help their teams . . .to act as like some kind of cultural conduit."

A third support that emerged multiple times was to provide nonworking assistance, almost as a "concierge or help desk." The organization should help "smooth out nonwork things that could limit someone's productivity." Some mentioned obtaining a driver's license and a cell phone among these concerns. One participant recounted his experience of packing and shipping a large amount of furniture and other supplies only to find out that 90% of these items were available for purchase in Saudi Arabia. The list of needed items his company had provided was out of date.

A fourth suggestion was to conduct an interest inventory to provide community connections, including an onboarding buddy who is distinct from a professional mentor: "The principles behind it are this is the person who will help you with answering questions that you might not want to ask your boss, or you might not want to offend a local." Participants emphasized the necessity for the expatriate to continue "living their life," to engage in familiar activities of interest and connect with others who share those interests, "get them into micro-communities." Another participant emphasized the importance of reaching beyond the expatriate community and interacting with the local Saudi citizens.

Fifth, both surveys and interviews revealed the importance of including the spouse in onboarding activities. According to one participant, "if you really dig down into the failure of any expat gig, any expat opportunity, it lies within the spouse." He elaborated further, "You basically must treat the wife as an employee, and that they are going through this, too. . . It causes all sorts of craziness, right? And so, yes, so this is if you're going to coach anybody, make sure the spouse is part of the team that has knowledge transfer." Survey data supported the need for organizations to incorporate the family in onboarding activities, noting that the failure to integrate family members into the onboarding process has led to some expatriates struggling to adapt. Sixty-six percent of survey respondents believed that a lack of cultural awareness was the reason for expatriate failures. The interviews noted how important the spouse was in driving adaptation.

One of the challenges that current expatriates face is that the trailing spouse is usually a professional, with credentials and expertise equal to that of the expatriate, who has left a high-earning job to relocate to Saudi Arabia for several years. These situations work better when the trailing spouse uses the opportunity to start a family or stay home with young children. However, if the trailing spouse must leave a high-ranking position to make the move, that person is likely to be unhappy. One participant explained that "the higher the sacrifice a couple is making in terms of career, family, financial–whatever, the more they are going to have challenges living in that culture." (see appendix 1–survey).

Recommendations

Once the team completed the data collection, secondary analysis, and coding of the stakeholder interviews, we developed a consolidated list of key themes. The team presented these themes to the project sponsor to incorporate context. This led us to create five recommendations. Consistent with our conceptual framework, each recommendation is anchored against one of the three onboarding stages, namely: job design, recruiting, and pre-departure onboarding, the objective being to maximize cultural adaptation.

Summary of the Project Recommendations

- Develop a structured checklist to determine whether a job role requires an expatriate.

- Emphasize skills and knowledge transfer over professional titles.

- Use psychometrics during the recruiting process to assess cultural flexibility and emotional intelligence. Correlate these scores to long-term expatriate performance.

- Launch a pre-departure training program–that includes the spouse–to cover The Kingdom's high-context culture and help expatriates form "micro communities" and local connections within the Saudi community. This includes initiating interactions during pre-departure.

- Assist expatriates and their families with nonwork-related logistics.

Recommendations for Finding One

Beginning with job design, the first stage of our conceptual framework, our team believes that developing a guided checklist, which helps hiring managers understand whether a particular work challenge is best suited for an American expatriate, would be useful (1a, 1b). Fifty-seven percent of survey respondents felt that a standard template was important, while 92 percent believed that expatriate roles should require multi-year commitments (see appendix 1–survey). The

stakeholder interviews highlighted the importance of expatriates feeling fully utilized in their role. For hiring managers, this means that they should connect any expatriate role to multi-year projects (1e), which allow the expatriate to leverage their technical skills and provide mentoring (1c). During the job design phase, it is important that expatriate roles possess three factors: long-term project responsibilities, technical skill requirements, and the ability to mentor local nationals. If the position only meets one or two of those objectives, then member companies would be better served relying on consultants.

Secondly, our recommendation is to emphasize skills and knowledge transfer, versus professional titles (1d). During the interviews, stakeholders noted that some expatriates fail because they arrive in The Kingdom having held senior roles. However, their current skill set is less transferable to local nationals based on the job design (i.e., the role needs specific things). To mitigate this disparity, we recommend designing expatriate jobs with specific skill clusters. Examples include AI/machine learning, finance and treasury, and engineering. Less technical roles such as Human Resources can be managed through short-term consultants or external training programs. An essential component of expatriate roles is knowledge transfer and mentoring the local replacement (Meyskens et al., 2009). This means targeting difficult-to-acquire skills.

By emphasizing skills and using a job design checklist, we believe that AmCham members would improve the success of their expatriate onboarding process. Furthermore, the cost of hiring, processing, and relocating expatriates would diminish as several roles would likely be transitioned to short-term consulting projects or training vendors.

Recommendations for Finding 2

Regarding the recruiting stage, we recommend that hiring managers add psychometric assessments to evaluate an expatriate's career interests and cultural flexibility (2a, 2b). The literature noted that a U-shaped curve occurs as part of the onboarding process, whereby expatriates experience short-term challenges associated with arrival, which gradually improve as they interact with locals and integrate into the work environment (Zhu et. al, 2016). Supporting this idea, the survey and stakeholder interviews emphasized the need for recruiters to assess the cultural flexibility of candidates. Assuming the organization has designed the job role correctly, it is important that the selection process incorporates the behavioral competencies needed for success. For AmCham members, we recommend developing a list of core competencies and validating those categories using existing expatriates that have succeeded in The Kingdom.

As we detailed in the findings section (2a), some potential areas of focus could include humility, cultural flexibility, emotional intelligence, patience, understanding, extroversion, and polite tenacity. Over time, supervisors could evaluate assessment results against expatriate performance to determine which behavioral competencies have the strongest connection to expatriate adaptation. Uncertainty reduction theory supports this recommendation. Expatriates who are self-aware and adaptable can reduce their uncertainty associated with the host nation (Zhu et al., 2016). Mitigating this uncertainty is a success factor in learning the contextual factors that influence decision-making.

Recommendations for Findings 3 and 4

Hiring managers should recruit candidates who have considerable prior global experience (3a). In addition, onboarding activities should help newly hired candidates understand the importance of relationship-building as a workplace strategy as well as the rigid corporate hierarchy (3c) and one-direction communication in Saudi Arabia.

Organizations should provide expatriates with a clear description of the assignment with clear objectives and a clear understanding of the way their role serves the organization's values (4a). In terms of pre-departure activities, our team identified two recommendations that may meaningfully improve expatriate adaptation. The first is to incorporate the spouse in the onboarding process (4c, 4e). This includes having them attend initial orientation meetings, participate in the relocation process, and serve as cosigners for important logistics. For example, the stakeholder interviews noted that spouses often have trouble setting up their mobile phones, coordinating school enrollment, or attending healthcare without the involvement of the working spouse. By integrating the spouse into the pre-departure process, while providing her/him with the ability to transact on logistical processes independently, AmCham companies can improve family cohesion and reduce the burdens of relocation stress.

Separately, the survey and stakeholder responses noted the importance of cultural awareness in expatriate success (4b). Sixty eight percent of survey respondents noted that a lack of cultural awareness was a key driver of expatriate failure (see appendix 1–survey). The literature supported these observations, noting the differences between high-context versus low-context societies. Despite Saudi Arabia being high-context, most AmCham members relied on onboarding

programs that emphasized low-context items such as logistics, relocation, and legal matters. However, the expatriates and their families had to navigate the importance of cultural awareness without employer support. In our view, companies could improve by providing an explanation of Saudi's high-context culture, while the expatriates were still in the United States completing pre-departure activities. Companies could accomplish this goal by using a training partner, who provided an overview of the Kingdom's cultural norms, especially those that are distinct from Western societies. Furthermore, AmCham companies could set up introductory sessions with local nationals to meet the selected candidates (4d). These discussions could occur via videoconference and focus on the contextual items within Saudi Arabia.

Collectively, our team believes that developing a job design checklist for expatriate roles, emphasizing skills over professional titles, utilizing psychometric assessments to assess candidates for cultural flexibility, incorporating the spouse into the pre-departure process, and launching a cultural awareness training program that local nationals supplement would be beneficial. Though Saudi Arabia is a vibrant society with decades of experience working with expatriates, this project identified several areas where companies could optimize existing practices. The Kingdom has developed a strong value proposition for foreign workers, which AmCham supports through its professional networking and business development activities. The more members assist expatriates with understanding the high-context nature of the Kingdom, the easier it will be to assimilate workers with the right skills that can advance the society's objectives. Saudi Arabia is an evolving society with tremendous potential. Expatriate onboarding is a key process that can be used to strengthen the partnership between the Kingdom and its international worker pool.

Conclusion

Taking the view that Saudi Arabia is a high-context culture, it is important for onboarding programs to address the implicit cultural elements that impact expatriate adaptation. Our conceptual framework articulated three stages that impact expatriate onboarding: 1) job design, which emphasizes the factors that determine if a role needs an expatriate; 2) recruiting, which focuses on the process for identifying and selecting candidates; and 3) pre-departure activities, which stipulates that need for cultural awareness training and incorporating the spouse.

Though many onboarding programs address the *explicit* demands of relocating to Saudi Arabia such as legal norms, visa processing, and logistics, this project identified the need for addressing gaps in the *implicit* requirements. Our findings suggest that recruiters lack a structured process for designing expatriate roles. This process requires carefully assessing whether a project requires a multi-year commitment, alongside knowledge transfer to a local national. Likewise, organizations subjectively screen candidates for emotional intelligence without using psychometrics. This method is insufficient because most candidates have similar professional backgrounds and technical skills.

The key differentiator in expatriate performance is emotional intelligence. Furthermore, the findings highlighted that the spouse is not incorporated into the pre-departure activities. This gap limits the ability of expatriate families to transition since many key processes (i.e., visas, IDs, cellphones, and housing) require coordination. Lastly, our findings highlighted the need for cultural awareness training during the pre-departure phase. This curriculum would focus on the contextual

items impacting Saudi culture, those which manuals, policy documents, or governmental forms do not convey.

Linked to our findings, the project team identified five recommendations. First, develop a structured checklist for expatriate job design. This tool would be used by recruiters and hiring managers to determine if an expatriate, consultant, or temporary contractor would be the ideal candidate. The organization would modify the checklist over time as project performance was assessed against the type of workers employed. Second, incorporate knowledge transfer as a key success factor in the recruiting process. Instead of looking solely at technical skills, recruiters should evaluate candidates on their ability to pass on knowledge. Third, embed psychometrics into the interview process focusing on emotional intelligence. Organizations should require candidates to take a validated assessment that tracks their ability to culturally adapt. Over time, companies should correlate assessment results with hiring performance to ensure that the metrics are predicting expatriate performance. Fourth, integrating the spouse into the pre-departure activities. These activities include logistical processes such as visa, cellphones, and housing. However, they also include interacting with mentors and local nationals. Fifth and finally, embed cultural awareness training into the pre-departure activities. To do this, AmCham should partner with a training provider to develop a curriculum that holistically addresses the "implicit" context of Saudi Arabia.

In terms of data challenges, IRB guidelines limited the type of stakeholder interviews that the team could conduct; therefore, the ten interview participants consisted entirely of American expatriates. Though their expertise was significant, the fact that we could not interview any Saudi citizens was a potentially important limitation. Ideally, AmCham should conduct additional

interviews of this population to compare the Americans' responses with the Saudi nationals' responses. Differences between the two may elicit further areas of emphasis when addressing onboarding. This could include communication and expectation gaps, which employers could incorporate into pre-departure activities. Separately, the AmCham survey generated 37 responses. This sample size provided a directional signal. However, more responses would be needed to validate the findings. This includes sourcing additional recruiters, as the current survey collected only six percent of responses from this job category.

Furthermore, it would be useful to engage in site visits to directly observe the process. This includes watching candidates complete the onboarding orientation, alongside reviewing materials provided during pre-departure. Interviews with spouses would be useful to confirm the gaps identified in this project. In terms of assessing onboarding programs, a correlation study comparing the pre-departure activities to expatriate performance and retention would be useful. The conceptual framework recommends completing this data analysis after the expatriate has completed a minimum of one year of employment.

Overall, Saudi Arabia is a vibrant culture with a robust history of employing expatriates. The implicit demands of the society are complex and largely unexplained during the onboarding process. However, the project identified a willingness among AmCham members to assist expatriates with learning these concepts. Ultimately, the ability of expatriates to successfully adapt to Saudi culture determines whether AmCham achieves its goals regarding business development and knowledge sharing. It is incumbent on executives to prepare their workforce for the cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and America. This project determined that the pre-departure

phase of onboarding is the best vehicle for addressing these issues. By working collaboratively with

members, AmCham can develop a culturally relevant onboarding program.

References

Alshahrani, S. T. (2022). The motivation for the mobility - A comparison of the company

assigned and self-initiated expatriates in Saudi Arabia. *Cogent Social Sciences, 8*(1), 1-

22. DOI: 10.1080/23311886.2022.2027626.

Asif, U., Bano, N., and Hend, A. N. (2020). Experiences of expatriate university teachers in a

health science university in Saudi Arabia-A qualitative study. *Pakistan Journal of Medical

Science*, 36(4), 799-803.

Berger, C. R., and Calabrese, R. J. (1975). Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond:

Towards a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication

Research, 1*(2), 99-112. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1975.tb00258.x

Beugelsdijk, S., Kostova, T., and Roth, K. (2017). An overview of Hofstede-inspired

country-level culture research in international business since 2006. *Journal of International

Business Studies, 48*, 30-47. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-016-0038-8.

Bhuian, S., Al-Shammari, E., and Jefri, O. (1996). Organizational commitment, job

satisfaction, and job characteristics: An empirical study of expatriates in Saudi Arabia.

International Journal of Commerce and Management, 6(3-4), 57-80.

Bird, A., Osland, J. S., Mendenhall, M., and Schneider, S. C. (1999). Adapting and adjusting

to other cultures: What we know but don't always tell. *Journal of Management Inquiry,

8*(2), 152-165.

Black, J. S., and Gregersen, H. B. (1999). The right way to manage expats. *Harvard Business

Review, 77*(2), 52-62.

Bozionelos, N. (2009). Expatriation outside the boundaries of the multinational

corporation: A study with expatriate nurses in *Saudi Arabia. Human Resources*

Management, 48(1), 111-134. DOI: 10.1002/hrm.20269.

Cartus Global Survey Shows Trend to Shorter-Term International Relocation Assignments. (2007,

Jul 30). *Business Wire*

http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/ wire-

feeds/cartus-global-survey-shows-trend-shorter-term/docview/444990696/se-2.

Cassell, M. A., and Blake, R. J. (2012). Analysis of Hofstede's 5-D model: The implications of

conducting business in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Management & Information*

Systems, 16(2), 151-160.

Cuevas, P., Beda-Andourou, A., Bernal, M., Bolivar, M., and Mujtaba, B. G. (2011). Lessons

from Fred Bailey's expatriate experience in Japan: Proactively preparing employees for

international assignments. *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly, 2*(4), 40-52.

Davies, S. E., Stoermer, S., and Froese, F. J. When the going gets tough: the influence of expatriate

resilience and perceived organizational inclusion climate on work adjustment and turnover

intentions. International Journal of Human Resource Management, 30(8), 1393-1417.

https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2018.1528558.

Dollwet, M. (2013). *Socializing expatriates and their spouses: New considerations for*

expatriate spouse adjustment through organizational onboarding. (Publication No.

3606023). [Doctoral dissertation, Claremont Graduate University]. Proquest Dissertations

Publishing.

Eisenberger, R., Huntington, R., Hutchison, S., & Sowa, D. (1986, Aug.) Perceived organizational

support. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 71*(3), 500-507. DOI:10.1037/0021-9010.71.3.500.

Freeman, M. L. (2020). Adjusting to working away and as an expatriate: Learnings on what

organizations can do to promote the mental health and well-being of workers and their

families. *APPEA Journal, 60*(2), 440-445. https://doi.org/10.1071/AJ19133

Gundykunst, W. B., Nishida, T., and Chua, E. (1987). Perceptions of social penetration in

Japanese-North American dyads. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 11,* 171-

189.

Hadeed, S. A., and Henry-Campbell, S. (2021). Perspectives in HRD-Expatriate experiences

and the role HRD plays in cultural awareness in international companies. *New Horizons in*

Adult Education & Human Resource Development, 33(2), 69-73.

Hall, E. T., and Hall, M. R. (2001). Key concepts: Underlying structures of culture.

International Human Resource Management: Managing Diversity in the Workplace, *24*.

Hall, E. T. (1960). The silent language in overseas business. *Harvard Business Review*,

(60308), 87-95.

Hall, E. T. (1963). A system for notation of proxemic behavior. *American Anthropologist,*

65(5), 1003-1026.

Hobfall, S. E. (2002). Social and psychological resources and adaptation. *Review of General*

Psychology, 6(4), 307-324. DOI:10.1037/1089-2680.6.4.307.

Hofstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context. *Online*

Readings in Psychology and Culture, 2(1). http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.0114.

Isakovic, A. A., & Whitman, M. F. (2013). Self-initiated expatriate adjustment in the United

Arab Emirates: A study of academics. *Journal of Global Mobility, 1*(2), 161-186.

Jackson, D. (2012). *A phenomenological exploratory study of Western expatriates'*

cross-cultural adjustment to Saudi Arabia. (Publication No. 351245). [Doctoral dissertation, Capella University]. Proquest Dissertations Publishing.

Jochems, L. (2019). *The influence of cross-cultural training on the different forms of expatriates' adjustment: A literature review*. [Unpublished bachelor's thesis]. Tilburg University.

Korac-Kakabadse N, Kouzmin A, Korac-Kakabadse A, Savery L. Low- and high-context communication patterns: towards mapping cross-cultural encounters. *Cross Cultural Management*. 2001;8(2):3-24. doi:10.1108/13527600110797218.

Khalil, M., Jabeen, N., Jadoon, Z. I., and Salman, Y. (2016). Female expatriates and cross cultural adjustment: A study of Saudi Arabia. *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies, 23*(2), 45-69.

Lave, J., and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.

Leiva, F. B., Poilpot-Rocaboy, G., and St. Onge, S. (2018). Social support and life-domain interactions among assigned and self-initiated expatriates. *European Management Review, 15*, 293-213. DOI: 10.1111/emre.12149.

Little, S. E. (2019). The relationship of cultural adjustment and job satisfaction in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: A correlational study. (Publication No. 22623294). [Doctoral dissertation, University of Phoenix]. Proquest Dissertations Publishing.

Meyskens M, Von Glinow MA, Werther J, Clarke L. (2009). The paradox of international talent: alternative forms of international assignments. *International journal of human resource management, 20*(6):1439-1450. doi:10.1080/09585190902909988.

Molinsky, A. L. (2013). Global dexterity: How to adapt your behavior across cultures without losing

yourself in the process. *Harvard Business Review Press*.

Moon, H. K., Choi, B. K., & Jung, J. S. (2012). Previous international experience, cross-cultural training, and expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment: Effects of cultural intelligence and goal orientation. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 23*(3), 285-330. DOI: 10.1002/hrdq.21131.

Muhamad, F. K. (2022). Adjustment in international work context: The case of self-initiated expatriate. (Publication No: 29424476). [Doctoral dissertation, Lancaster University]. Proquest Dissertations Publishing.

Palmer, B. M. W. (2015). Understanding cultural conflict in EFL classrooms in the UAE. *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 1*(2), 77-95.

Saquib, N., Zaghloul, M.S., Saquib, J., Alhomaidan, H. T., Al-Mohaimeed, A., and Al-Mazrou, A. (2019). *Journal of Nursing Management,* 27, 740-748. DOI: 10.111/jonm.12762.

Shi, X., and Wang, J. (2011). Interpreting Hofstede model and GLOBE model: Which way to go for cross-cultural research? *International Journal of Business and Management, 6*(5), 93-99.

Stahl, G. K., Miller, E. L., and Tung, R. L. (2002). Toward the boundaryless career: A closer look at the expatriate career concept and the perceived implications of an international assignment. *Journal of World Business, 37*, 216-227.

Stanek, M. B. (2001). Global mentoring programs: Business relationships beyond traditional borders. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 13*(2), 66-73.

Stensberg, Kevin J. (2021). *Cultural dexterity: An action research study of Western expatriate student affairs professionals on the Arabian Peninsula.* (Publication No. 28318442). [Doctoral dissertation). Northeastern University]. Proquest Dissertations Publishing.
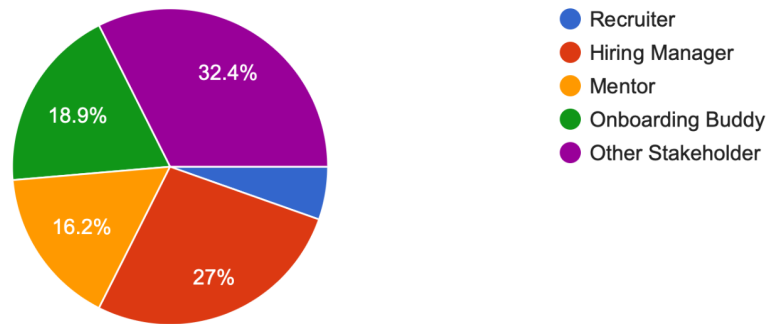
Ting-Toomey, S., and Kurogi, A. (1998). Facework competence in intercultural conflict: An updated

    face-negotiation theory. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 22(2), 187-225.

Tung, R. L. (1987). Expatriate assignments: Enhancing success and minimizing failure. *Academy of*

    Management EXECUTIVE, 1(2), 117-125.

Tung, R. L. (1988). Career issues in international assignments. *Academy of Management*

    EXECUTIVE, 2(3), 241-244.

van Bakel, M. (2018). It takes two to tango: A review of the local research on expatriate-local

    interactions. *International Journal of Human Resource Management, 30*(21), 2993-3025.

    DOI: 10.1080/09585192.2018.1449763.

Yusuf, B. N. M. Zakaria, N., and Abdul-Talib, A. (2021). Using social network tools to facilitate

    cultural adjustment of self-initiated Malaysian female expatriate nurses in Saudi Arabia.

    Journal of Infection and Public Health, 14, 380-384.

Zawawi, A. N., and Al-Rashed, A. M. (2020). The experience of foreign doctors in Saudi Arabia: A

    qualitative study of the challenges and retention motives. Heliyon.

    https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e03901.

Zhu, J., Wanberg, C. R., Harrison, D. A., & Diehn, E. W. (2016). Ups and downs of the expatriate

    experience? Understanding work adjustment trajectories and career outcomes. *Journal of*

    Applied Psychology, *101*(4), 549.
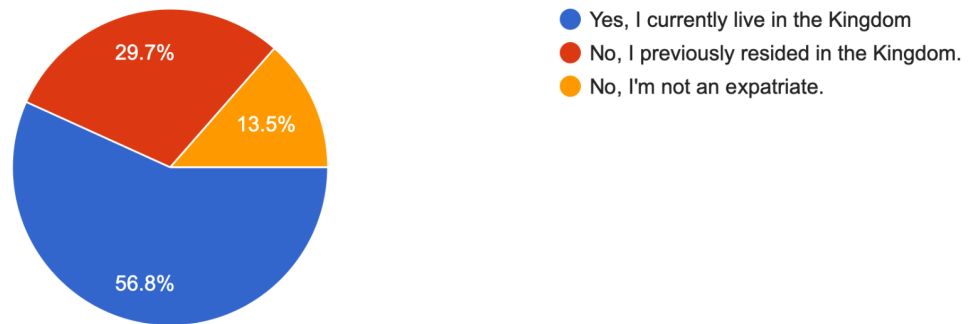
Appendices:

Appendix 1–AmCham Survey

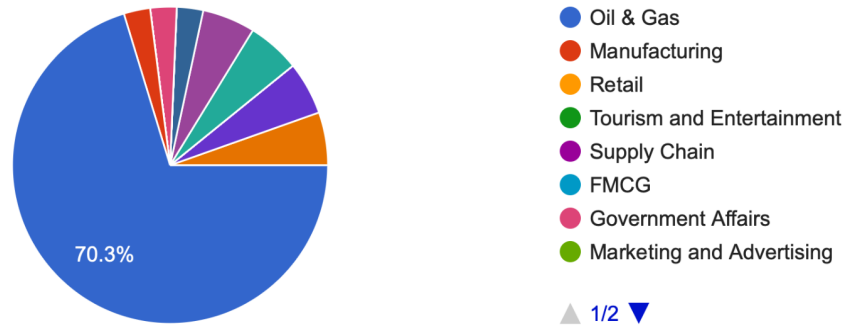Please indicate your primary role in recruiting, selecting, and on-boarding expatriates.
37 responses

- ● Recruiter
- ● Hiring Manager
- ● Mentor
- ● Onboarding Buddy
- ● Other Stakeholder

32.4%
18.9%
16.2%
27%

Are you an expatriate living in Saudi Arabia?
37 responses

- ● Yes, I currently live in the Kingdom
- ● No, I previously resided in the Kingdom.
- ● No, I'm not an expatriate.

29.7%
13.5%
56.8%

Please indicate the industry sector you currently work in.
37 responses

- Oil & Gas
- Manufacturing
- Retail
- Tourism and Entertainment
- Supply Chain
- FMCG
- Government Affairs
- Marketing and Advertising

1/2

Please indicate the size of your company.
37 responses

- 0-100 Employees
- 100-1000 Employees
- 1001-10,000 Employees
- 10,000+ Employees
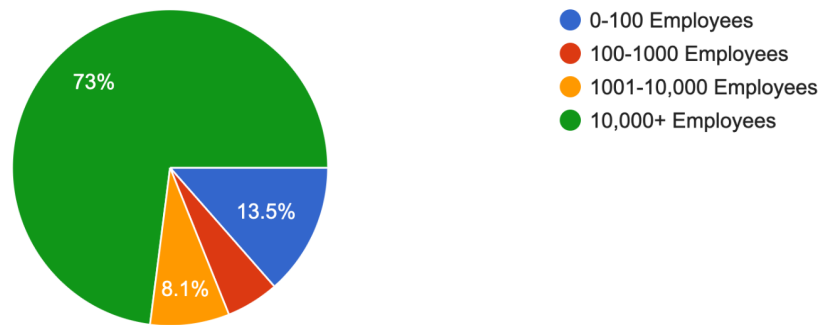
I believe an expatriate role is needed when a project requires professional skills that are difficult to train and not readily available.

37 responses
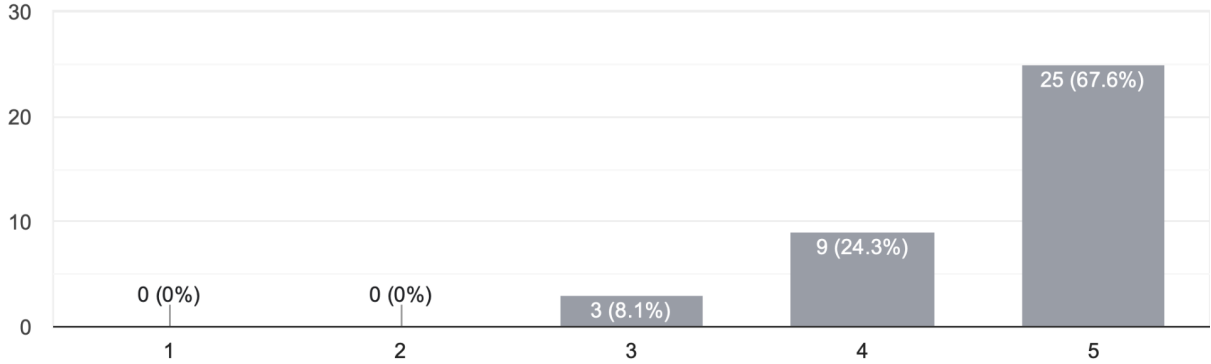
I believe an expatriate role should require a multi-year commitment. Shorter assignments should be handled by consultants.

37 responses
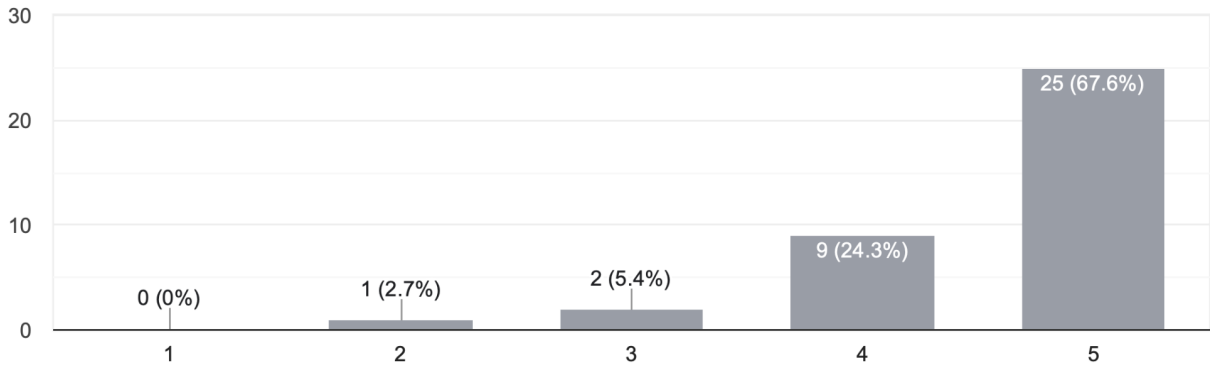
I believe that positions should meet certain criteria before companies fill a role with an expatriate. Therefore, companies should use a standard template.
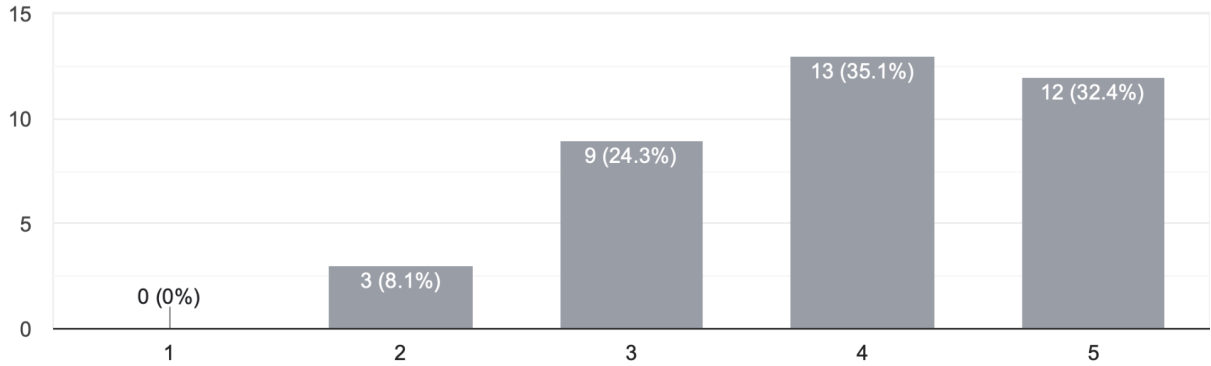
37 responses
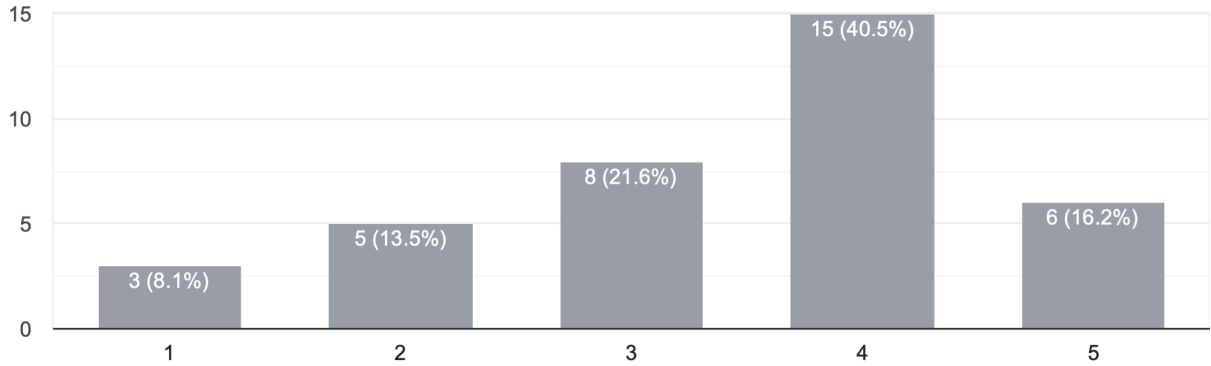
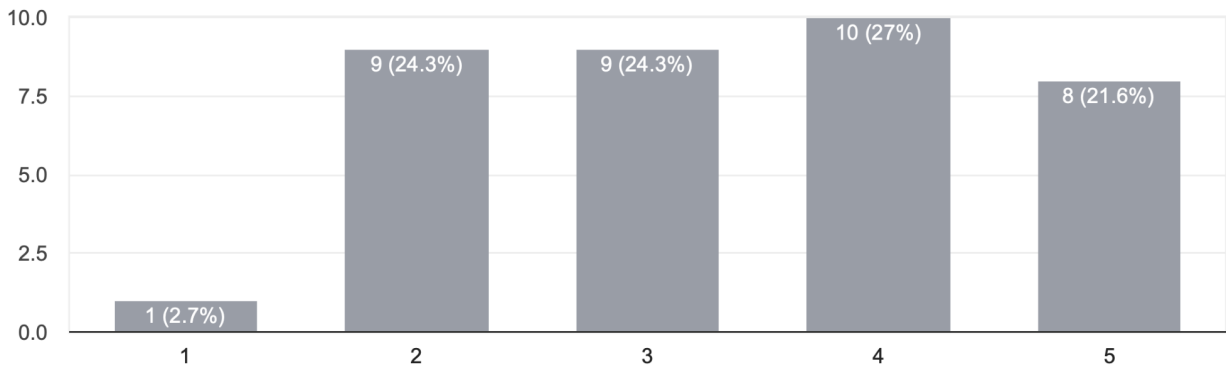For expatriate roles, rank the below competencies in terms of importance.
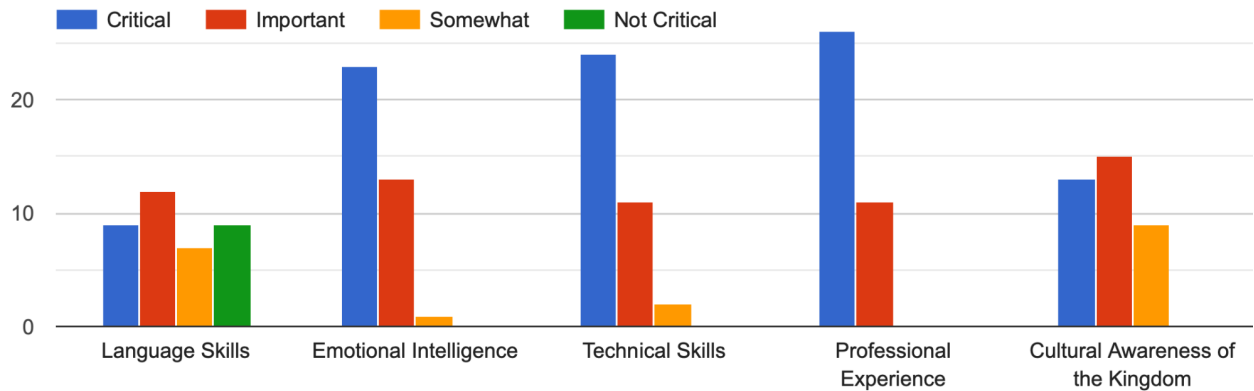
I believe that assessments which measure emotional intelligence should be included in the candidate screening process.

37 responses

I believe that prior experience working in a host nation is a critical success factor for an expatriate role.
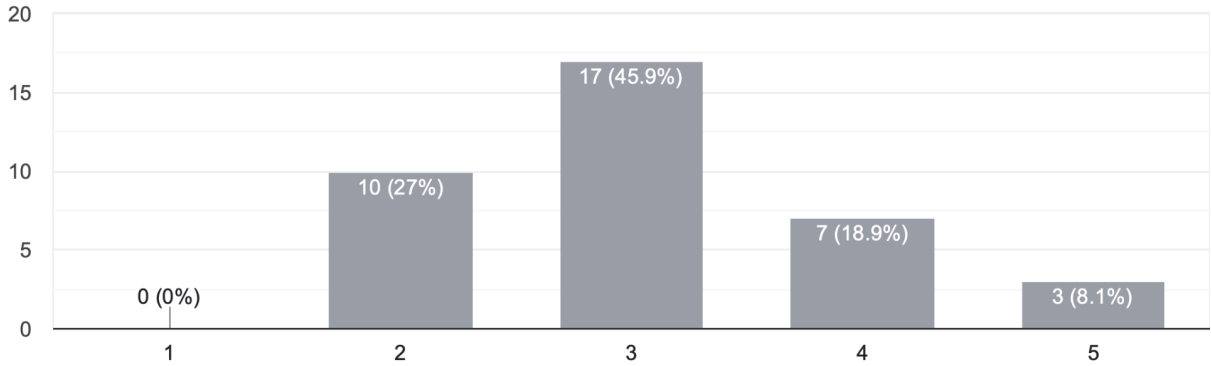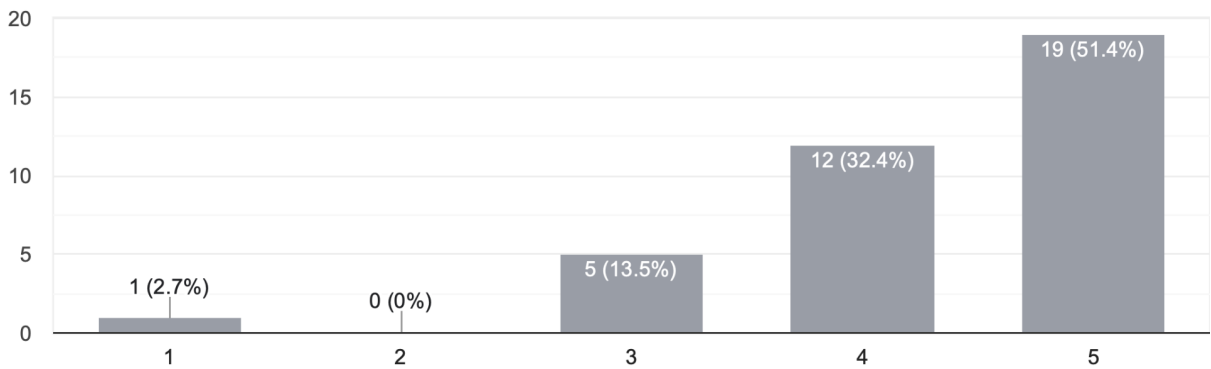
37 responses

I believe that sufficient market data exists to help recruiters identify and select qualified expatriates.
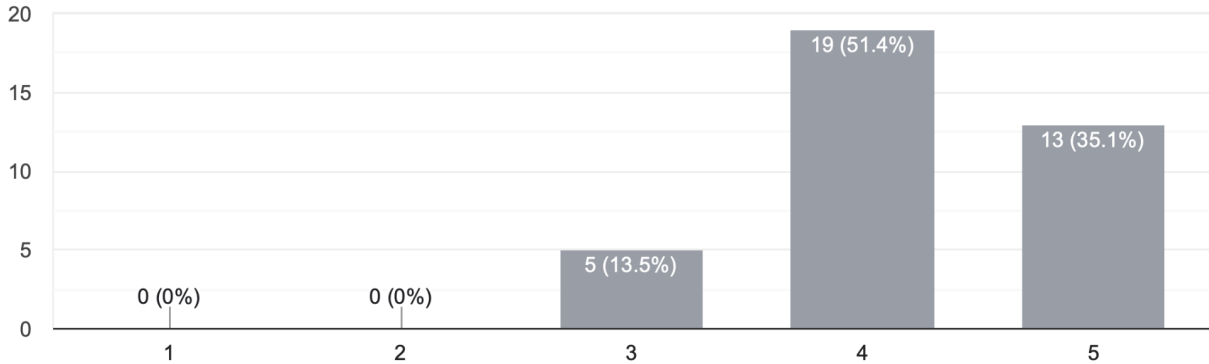
37 responses

I believe that an interview committee should include technical and non-technical participants for expatriate roles.

37 responses

I believe that a realistic job preview should be included in the interview process for expatriate roles prior to making an offer.
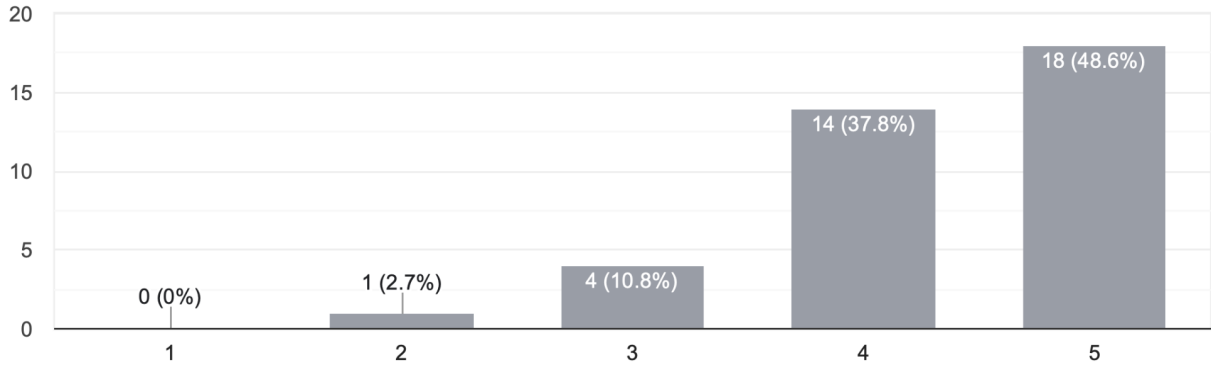
37 responses

When selecting an expatriate, rank the below factors in terms of importance.
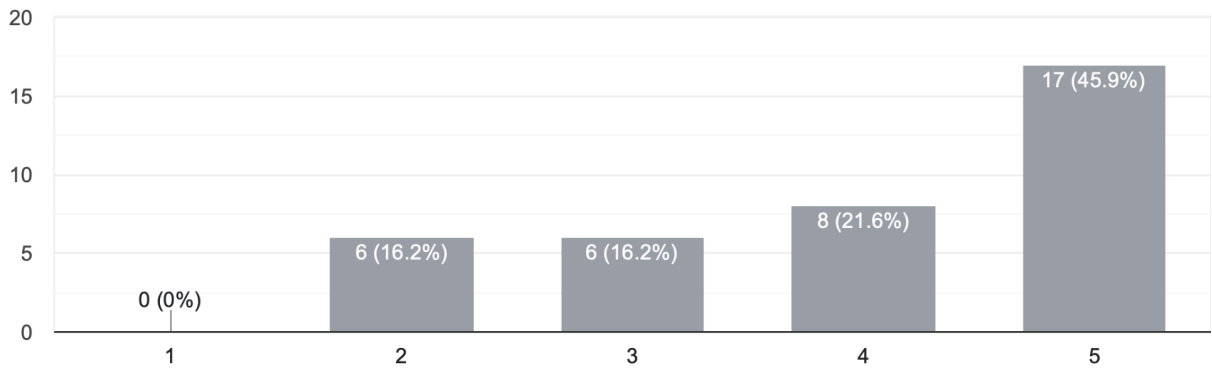
I believe it's beneficial for a mentor to be assigned to an expatriate during the pre-departure onboarding process.

37 responses

I believe that a lack of cultural awareness is a key reason that expatriates fail to adapt during their first year in the host nation.

37 responses

I believe that language training should be included in the pre-departure onboarding process for expatriate roles.
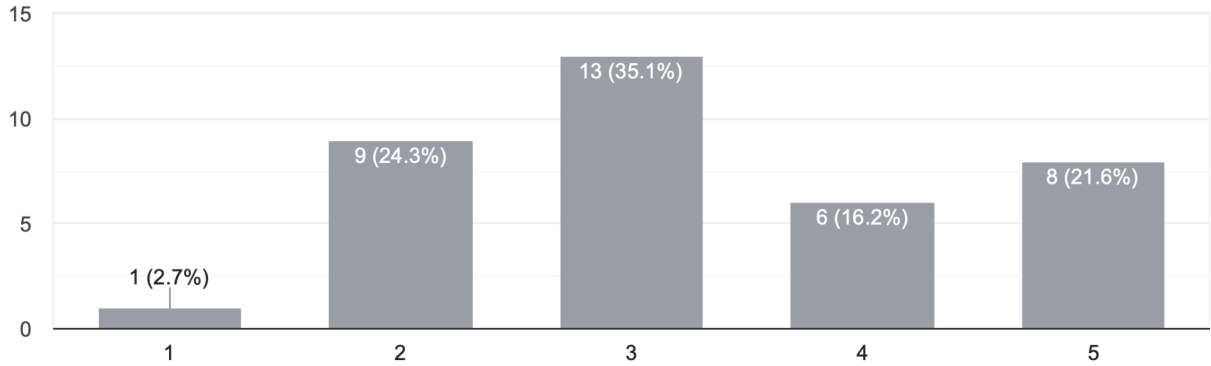
37 responses

I consent to these responses being used as part of the summary analysis for the Expatriate Onboarding Project. Individual responses will be kept anonymous and confidential.

37 responses

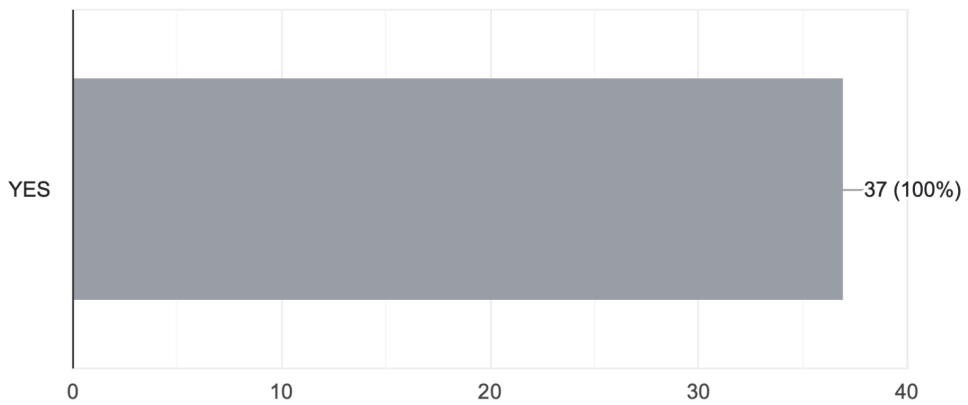**Appendix 2–Matrix of how survey questions align with the conceptual framework**

Category	Maps to Conceptual Framework	Question
Respondent Profile	Identifies the respondent's characteristics	Tell me about your role as an expatriate stakeholder.
Job Design	Maps to Job Stage in Conceptual Framework	How do you define expatriate "success"?
Recruiting	Maps to Recruitment Stage in Conceptual Framework	In your experience, what personal characteristics have determined the success of an expatriate?
Onboarding	Maps to Pre-Departure Onboarding	What is the most important way in which an organization can help an expatriate succeed?
Overall	Best Practices	In your view, what are the key lessons you've learned that corporations should follow in placing expatriates?

Appendix 3–List of Interview Participants

#	Organization	Role
1	Formerly Saudi Aramco (Retired)	Head of HR, Operations
2	Saudi Luberef Refinery	Head of Talent Management
3	AmCham	Vice President
4	Saudi Aramco	Talent Assessments & Selection
5	Sadara Chemical Company	Talent Assessments & Selection
6	Saudi Aramco	HR & Performance Specialist
7	Saudi Aramco	Process Improvement Specialist
8	Saudi Aramco	Finance Controller
9	Saudi Aramco	Learning Specialist
10	Haliburton	Engineering Leader

Appendix 4–Project Timeline–Gantt Chart

Data Collection Plan	1Q - 2023			2Q - 2023		
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Develop Data Collection Plan	Survey Design	Interview Template				
Project Sponsor and Advisor Approval	AmCham / Vanderbilt					
Receive IRB Approval		⭐				
AmCham Members Survey			Qualtrics			
Code and Calibrate (Survey)			⭐ ◆			
Conduct Stakeholder Interviews				Recruiters, Managers, Mentors		
Code and Calibrate (Interviews)					⭐ ◆	
Finalize Data Analysis					Consolidated Findings	

⭐ Key Milestone ◆ High-Context Review with Sponsor