

Why Do American Construction Professionals Choose to Work Abroad on U.S. Embassy Projects?

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This qualitative research study examines some of the motivating factors and personality traits found in American construction professionals who have experience working on United States embassy projects. In response to global terrorism in the 1990's, the United States federal government has entered into a phase of building newer, more secure embassy buildings in several countries across the globe. Construction professionals who choose to work on these projects are faced with a multitude of conditions, which would not likely be found in US domestic projects. Twenty construction professionals were interviewed about topics such as motivations to work overseas and personal challenges encountered abroad. Structured videotaped interviews were used as an investigative research tool. Analysis and conclusions are based upon the interviewees' responses.

Keywords: Motivation, International Construction, U.S. Embassy, Career

Introduction

Since 2000, the United States (US) government has increased its efforts in designing and constructing US embassy buildings overseas (US State Department, 2008). In the 1970's, the threat of global terrorism prompted the federal government to more closely examine the delivery systems with which embassies are built on foreign soil. Again, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the US government dramatically ramped up its embassy security measures, creating opportunities for many international construction firms. According to Willis (personal interview, October 18, 2007), pre-9/11 US embassy buildings were, in many countries, old mansions or former commercial buildings. These locations have unfortunately proven vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Therefore, the US government has entered into a new phase of designing and constructing overseas work, which has created increased opportunities for US contractors to build abroad. As of 2008, there were 282 US embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions on six continents (US State Department, 2008).

There are many factors, which can complicate the building process in foreign countries. In lesser developed countries, there can be any number of problems such as lack of fully functioning infrastructure, lack of service industries and government agencies, civil unrest, shortages of materials and skilled labor, poor quality local buildings, short construction seasons, and heavy turnover of contract staff due to difficult conditions (Retherford, 1998). Additionally, construction professionals who work overseas deal with the stresses of being far from home and in places where they may not speak the local language or adapt well to the local culture. These issues make overseas construction work a potentially daunting undertaking for American construction professionals. This paper investigates why Americans choose to work on US embassy projects and the motivating factors which are important to those individuals. It also explores cultural issues and personal challenges faced by those individuals working outside the United States.

Background

Existing literature, on international construction, identifies a company's ability to attract, develop, and retain key people on overseas work assignments as a high priority for the firm. In their article titled *Factors Affecting International Construction*, Arditi and Gunhan (2005) comment:

Construction firms' primary asset is their people. They are on the front lines building a structure and interacting with several parties on a daily basis. They create the source of competitive advantage. ... It is not easy to find the right

people when needed. Losing talented key employees in a specific overseas assignment may hamper communication with local entities, exacerbate the clash of cultures, lead to misunderstandings of the risks involved, and consequently may influence the project in a negative way. (p. 277)

International construction workers tend to be confronted with challenges that may not be prevalent on domestic jobs in their home countries. Chan and Tse (2003) note, "In international construction projects, any party involved must be cross-culturally competent" (p. 376). Cultural, language, and other such issues must be addressed regularly by construction professionals while working overseas.

International corporations invest a lot of money and resources into training and preparing employees that are assigned to manage projects around the world. In order to keep up with other multinational companies, U.S. corporations are going global, but are the respected managers prepared to follow? In today's international marketplace, successful implementation of a global strategy depends upon getting the right people, with the right skills, in the right place, and at the right time (Brett & Stroh, 1995).

As international corporate activities increase, the staffing of their operations involves more strategic concerns. However, foreign assignments have many differences, and dissatisfaction with the host country is a known cause of expatriate failure (Chen, Tzeng, & Tang, 2005). In fact, failure rates have been estimated to range from 25% to 40% and associated costs for each failure estimated from \$55,000 to \$85,000 (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). Even though the statistics will fluctuate depending on the variables, corporations can ill afford to take the international assignment process lightly. Thus, a crucial question that faces many corporations will continue to be, Who is willing to accept expatriate assignments and see them through to completion (Borstorff, Feild, Giles, & Harris, 1997)?

Methodology

In order to gain a deeper, richer understanding of the issues involved with overseas construction professionals, this study used a qualitative research methodology. Also, due to the lack of previous studies in this specific area and the lack of validated survey instruments, the authors felt that using qualitative research techniques would be the best research strategy on this initial project. In this way, the authors hoped to establish a foundation of knowledge on the subject that later studies could build upon using other research strategies such as quantitative methods or action research.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) define qualitative research, as "any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (p. 10). This methodology was selected for this study because it is often difficult to quantify the personal thoughts and reflections given by individuals in response to written questionnaires. Strauss and Corbin continue on the subject of qualitative research:

It can refer to research about persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena, and interactions between nations. Some of the data may be quantified as with census or background information about the persons or objects studied, *but the bulk of the analysis is interpretive.* (p. 11)

Since this study dealt primarily with lived experiences and behaviors, qualitative research was deemed the most appropriate method for data collection. Multiple structured interviews were conducted with construction professionals who currently are, or have previously been, working abroad on US embassy projects. Participants for this study were employed by two international construction firms. The two firms have previously built US embassies, and are currently engaged in contracts to build US embassies and consulates in various parts of the world, including Africa, Asia, South and North America, Oceania, and Europe. These two firms have built, or were under contract (as of 2008) to build, over 40 US embassies, consulates, or supporting facilities in the past ten years. Also, during the past six years, these two firms have accounted for 20 – 40% of all US embassy and consulate work *per year* for the US State Department (US State Department, 2008).

All interviews were conducted in person at the individual's place of employment. All of the interviews were videotaped, with the exception of two. One interview was completed via telephone, and another was completed via

Internet chat. In all, twenty interviews were collected, eleven individuals worked for the first firm and nine worked for the second firm. All interview subjects were U.S. citizens, with the exception of one citizen of the United Kingdom. One subject was originally from Italy, but permanently resides in the United States. Individuals who volunteered to be interviewed for this research had various levels of international construction work experience, ranging from 5 to 40+ years. All of the individuals were currently working in construction management positions except one who was an electrical foreman.

In the interview process, the same questions were asked to each individual and in the same order. The questions were designed to be broad and open-ended in nature, which encouraged the respondents to explain their answers in depth, but also specific enough to warrant a pointed response without rambling. Individuals could give more than one answer to a question, but no attempt was made to rank order their responses. Some individuals gave no answer to a particular question, while others gave multiple answers ranging from two to six. Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes each, depending on the individual's answers and the depth of explanation. Furthermore, in order to protect the identity of the persons and firms used in this research, false names have been given to both when making reference to participant's direct quotes in the data analysis section of this paper (Fine, 1990).

The questions used in this research were derived from an earlier pilot study, conducted by one of the authors, while visiting US embassy construction projects in Lome, Togo and Accra, Ghana during the summer of 2006. During the West Africa visit, issues concerning motivation and why individuals chose to work overseas became a common theme when talking with personnel about their job duties and personal life. As an outgrowth of that initial study, the following questions were used in the interviews for this research:

1. What motivated you to try overseas work in the first place?
2. What motivates you to continue working overseas?
3. What are your long-term career goals in regards to staying in international construction?
4. What sort of personal challenges have you encountered while working overseas?
5. Has working overseas changed your outlook of the world?
6. What are the necessary personality traits for someone who wishes to be successful in overseas work?

Data Analysis

The first quantifiable piece of data obtained from the interview process was the various locations in which the individuals have worked. Africa and Asia are the areas where the majority of the interviewees have worked, with 80% having worked in various countries in Africa, and 75% in Asian countries. Europe had the next highest frequency, with 45%. North America, South America, Oceania, and the Caribbean follow, each with 20% or less. It is important to note that, in this instance, North America does not include the mainland United States or Canada. The sites in North America primarily include Mexico and Puerto Rico.

Question 1: What motivated you to try overseas work in the first place?

Figure 1 illustrates a breakdown of the common themes identified from answers to this question. Respondents often mentioned more than one reason for getting involved with overseas construction while others gave no answer.

Altruism		•						•											
Money				•		•	•	•		•		•	•						
Patriotism								•											
Family		•				•	•	•											•
Travel	•			•				•	•				•						•
Challenge												•						•	•
Adventure	•							•	•	•			•					•	•

Figure 1: A breakdown of responses for Question 1

In response to the question of initial motivating factors to work overseas, seven general themes were identified: adventure, challenge, travel, family reasons, patriotism, financial incentives, and altruism. Of these factors, adventure and financial incentives appeared the most, with seven instances out of the twenty interviews. On the subject of adventure, Smith commented, “I really just wanted a big adventure in life, and to see parts of the world and see really just a bigger picture about life”. Johnson echoed Smith’s sentiments: “Initially, I believe it was the sense of adventure. You know, I get out, see other places, have a chance to live there longer than just being a tourist. That motivated me, and I think that’s probably one of the things that keeps me here”.

Financial incentives were another driving influence for the subjects interviewed. Due to the challenging nature of overseas work, and the fact that those who work on the embassy projects spend long amounts of time away from home, working long hours (the common rule of thumb for a US embassy work week is *six tens*, meaning six days a week, ten hours per day), companies employing professionals on overseas projects typically pay greater salaries than they do for employees working domestically. Williams weighs in on the financial incentives: “Once I went overseas, the benefit of money made it more attractive (than domestic work)”. Adams goes into more detail about the driving factor in his decision to work overseas when he notes, “The real motivation was finance. The money is better, and the driving reason that I need more money is that I have two kids in college. Probably after I get them out of college, I’ll come back to the States and stay”. In addition to greater salaries, there is also a tax benefit of working abroad. Paul (2008), in *The Wall Street Journal*, notes, “If you make less than \$85,700 and live abroad, you have to file the usual return but the tax rate is undeniably generous: *nothing*”. Even if the salary is higher than the aforementioned figure, Americans who work abroad will only pay taxes on their income which exceeds \$87,500.

The opportunity to travel was another strong motivating factor among the construction professionals interviewed. Brown remarks, “I enjoy traveling. It’s easier to travel from overseas than it is from the US to go anywhere. It’s cheaper and it’s more convenient”. Perhaps the best summary of the top three motivators (adventure, money, and travel) comes from Carter, when he states, “I really enjoy traveling around the world, experiencing other cultures. It seemed like a great opportunity; a great adventure. And the money is good”.

Family reasons were the next motivator. Many of the respondents who mentioned family reasons were those who began working overseas when they were young, following in their father’s footsteps. Emerson notes, “I started overseas when I was thirteen with my father. My first assignment with him was in 1965 in Vietnam”. Green echoes a similar experience when he notes “My father worked overseas, and the family traveled with him. I’ve just always done it”. Adams noted a different type of family motivator, mentioning that his children were in college, and the higher salary coming along with international work helped him to provide for them.

Question 2: What motivates you to continue working overseas?

Question 2 differs from Question 1 in that the first question looked into the initial attraction of international construction. Question 2 attempts to seek out whether or not motivations change after professionals have already been working in international construction. The results of this question showed that while adventure and travel may have been the initial reasons many of the interviewees got into international work, the continued motivation has to do more with the challenging nature of the work. The financial incentive, however, remained a top motivator. Figure 2 displays the responses to this question.

blood”. Reasons related to family were mentioned twice, and patriotism and career advancement were each addressed once.

Question 3: What are your long-term career goals in regards to staying in international construction?

Figure 3 displays the responses to this question.

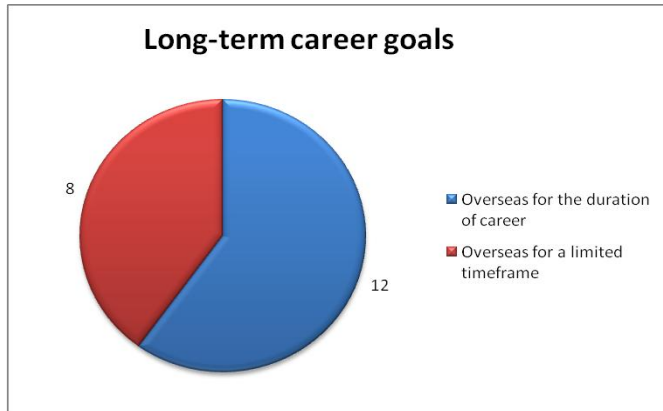


Figure 3: Breakdown of respondents who will continue their entire career overseas versus those who will eventually move on to something else. Response to question 3.

Twelve of twenty respondents stated that they planned on continuing international work for the duration of their career. Eight replied that they planned to work overseas for a limited amount of time, and then settle permanently in the United States or another location. It is interesting to note that five of those eight cited family reasons as to why they would eventually leave the international construction industry. Howell states:

I have a two-year old and a four-year old, so at some point I'll probably come back to the States and let them get grounded. I guess there are advantages and disadvantages to having kids overseas, but I enjoyed the baseball and football and all of that stuff, and I'd like for my kids to have that opportunity as well.

Garner comments on the subject of returning to the United States: "Ten to twelve years is my plan, and that is greatly influenced by starting a family". Another trend among those who said that they would eventually leave the overseas work mentioned a certain timeframe within which they would stop working internationally. Six of the eight had definite timeframes in mind as for the number of years they planned on working overseas – Lee: 20 years, Garner: 10 – 12 years, Murray: 10 years, Adams: 7 years, Smith: 10 years, Jackson: 20 years.

Some of those who responded *that they prefer to work overseas for the duration of their career* noted that the *lack* of family issues allows them to continue to stay in the international realm of construction. Newton states, "I like it. I'm single, all my children are grown, and I can live anywhere". Carter echoes the sentiment of not having family issues to hold him back when he states:

I plan on making a career out of it. My wife and I don't have children, and she enjoys being overseas too. We actually enjoy living overseas more than we like living in the States, so we plan on doing this for the full length of my career, and have pondered maybe even living outside of the United States once we're done.

Emerson, another respondent who wants to continue overseas work for the duration of his career, mentions the financial incentives again:

The salaries they pay overseas and the tax free benefits you get...they pay for your housing, and your insurance, and your car, so it becomes a financial thing where you can work overseas for a limited number of years, whereas you can work your entire life in the States to get to the same point.

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