

# American Construction Professionals Working for International Firms: An Initial Look at Motivation

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This research study explored why American construction professionals choose to live and work overseas. In other words, what are the motivating factors that attribute not only to the willingness of U.S. employees to accept expatriate positions, but also the ability to see projects through to completion? Foreign vs. domestic assignments have many differences and dissatisfaction with host countries is a known cause of expatriate failure (Chen, Tzeng, & Tang, 2005). An expatriate mistake, or failure, is defined as: the expatriate returning early and never completing the intended duration of the assignment (Martinko & Douglas, 1999). In fact, failure rates have been estimated to range from 25% to 40% and associated costs for each failure is estimated from \$55,000 to \$85,000 (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). Therefore, the following general themes were examined through a 26-question web-based survey: (1) What initially motivated you to try overseas construction work? (2) What motivates you to continue working overseas? and (3) What personality traits are essential to a successful overseas construction career? Employees from nine international design and construction firms were surveyed and the results were analyzed to form conclusions that may be helpful to human resource departments and managers of international construction operations.

**Keywords:** Motivation, International Construction, Expatriates, Career

## Introduction

Dating back to the early twentieth century, the relationship between people and their work has long attracted psychologists and other behavioral scientists. Currently, the study of motivation forms an essential part of both industrial-organizational psychology and vocational psychology. However, in the aforementioned fields, concepts like need, motive, and attitude are appearing with greater regularity than are notions of aptitude, ability, and skill (Wiley, 1997). Motivation, according to Ramlall (2004), has often been defined as “the willingness to exert high levels of effort toward organizational goals, conditioned by the effort’s ability to satisfy some individual need”. In this circumstance, a need is some internal state of being in which certain outcomes may appear more attractive than others. Furthermore, if the need remains unsatisfied, tension is created, which, in turn, stimulates a drive within the individual (Ramlall, 2004).

On the other hand, motivation is often described as the degree to which an individual wants and chooses to engage in certain specified behaviors. There are many different theories that suggest different reasoning, but a vast majority emphasizes an individual, deliberate choice of behavior analysis (Mitchell, 1982). The late psychologists A.H. Maslow and Frederick Herzberg organized human needs and motivations into differing categories. According to Maslow’s *Theory of Human Motivation*, humans are motivated by five levels of needs: (1) physiological (food, shelter, sex, etc.), (2) safety, (3) social, (4) ego, and (5) self-actualization, in ascending order (Kovach, 2001). Contrary to Maslow’s theory, Herzberg’s *Motivation-Hygiene Theory* divides need satisfaction into two factors: extrinsic and intrinsic. According to Herzberg, extrinsic factors, such as salary, working conditions, and job security, will merely prevent dissatisfaction, but do not necessarily guarantee job satisfaction if met. On the other hand, intrinsic factors, such as work itself, achievement, and recognition are motivators in and of themselves (Kovach, 2001).

## **Background**

As the world becomes smaller and U.S. businesses expand internationally to compete in the global economy, staffing operations are becoming more complex. One of the tactics used by multinational corporations is to implement expatriate programs. Unfortunately, many of these overseas assignments are unsuccessful, in which a significant number of managers return home prematurely from their projects (Borstorff, Feild, Giles, & Harris, 1997). Martinko & Douglas (1999) investigated employees' fitness for international assignments in relation to the overwhelming failure rates of U.S. corporations' expatriate programs. With an estimated 80,000 U.S. citizens working abroad in 1999, thirty percent were calculated as *mistakes* (Tung, 1998). An expatriate mistake, or failure, is defined as: the expatriate returning early and never completing the intended duration of the assignment (Martinko & Douglas, 1999). In addition to simple willingness or motivation, success in a foreign work assignment is dependent upon a specific skill set that, if not inherently possessed, must be developed through a rigorous training program.

Looking at this issue more closely, construction and design professionals that work on international projects face many challenges, so it makes sense that it would take a unique individual to truly be successful and see the assignment through to completion. In addition to cases of culture shock, many U.S. expatriates find that there are many factors, which can complicate the building process in foreign countries, especially in the lesser-developed countries. There can be any number of problems such as lack of fully functioning infrastructure, service industries and government agencies experiencing instability, civil unrest, shortages of adequate materials and trained craftsmen, difficulty in procuring and obtaining the proper materials, and short construction seasons (Jaselskis & Talukhaba, 1998). In addition, family problems and loss of community ties can often play a large role in expatriates' lack of motivation to finish assignments abroad or unwillingness to take assignments overseas in general. A combination of difficulties and daily issues often appear a daunting task to undertake, let alone overcome, for any design or construction professional considering taking a position overseas (Borstorff, et al., 1997).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore why American construction professionals choose to live and work overseas. More specifically, what are the motivating factors that attribute not only to the willingness of U.S. employees to accept expatriate positions, but also the ability to see projects through to completion? The answers to the following general themes might go a long way in determining an employees' willingness to accept assignments overseas:

1. What initially motivated you to try overseas construction work?
2. What motivates you to continue working overseas?
3. What personality traits are essential to a successful overseas construction career?

## **Rational for the Study**

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 host countries is a known cause of expatriate failure (Chen, et al., 2005). In fact, failure rates have been estimated to range from 25% to 40% and associated costs for each failure is 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, et al., 1997)?

## Research Design

In order to obtain a deeper understanding of the motivational factors behind design and construction professionals' willingness to relocate to work on international projects, this study used a quantitative research design. Quantitative data is, therefore, not abstract, but tends to be hard and reliable. In other words, quantitative studies and research produces measurements that are tangible, countable, physical features of the world (Bouma & Atkinson, 1995). Therefore, the authors chose a survey design to explore attitudes and opinions of construction professionals working on international projects. Creswell (2009) states, "A survey design provides a quantitative or numerical description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population" (p. 145).

The 26-question survey instrument, used in this study, was developed by the authors in conjunction with several individuals working for a large international construction firm. These individuals had over 85 years of combined experience in building projects in developing countries. (Due to page limitations of this article, the entire 26-question survey is not listed in an appendix and only the questions 10, 12, 19, 25 and 26 are included in the data analysis section.) While the population of the study includes every U.S. construction firm that has worked on international construction projects, the sample size for the survey was limited to employees of nine international firms headquartered in the following cities: Birmingham, AL; Montgomery, AL; San Francisco, CA; Irving, TX; Omaha, NE; Framingham, MA; and Houston, TX. There were 40 – 45 responses to each question and some individuals did not answer every question.

## Data Analysis

### *Motivations for Working in International Construction*

The analysis of Question 10 regarding the respondents' motivation to accept an initial overseas assignment is broken-down and portrayed in Figure 1 below:

10. What MOTIVATED you to accept your initial overseas assignment? (select all that apply)					
Top number is the count of respondents selecting the option. Bottom % is percent of the total respondents selecting the option.	Not Important	Slightly Unimportant	Neutral	Slightly Important	Very Important
Money	1 2%	2 4%	5 11%	16 36%	21 47%
Promotion/Career Advancement	1 2%	1 2%	9 21%	17 40%	15 35%
Professional Development	0 0%	1 2%	7 17%	15 36%	19 45%
Personal Challenge	0 0%	2 5%	1 2%	11 26%	28 67%
Experience living and working in another culture	1 2%	5 11%	4 9%	9 20%	26 58%
Family Experience	13 30%	3 7%	11 26%	9 21%	7 16%
Travel	1 2%	2 4%	5 11%	13 29%	24 53%
Adventure	1 2%	2 5%	7 17%	10 24%	22 52%
Patriotism	7 17%	5 12%	11 27%	8 20%	10 24%
Altruism (unselfish concern for the welfare of others; selflessness)	6 14%	8 19%	20 48%	5 12%	3 7%
Other	2 14%	3 21%	4 29%	1 7%	4 29%

Figure 1: Motivational factors in accepting initial international assignment

Based on the analysis of this question, one can see that *personal challenge* and *experience living and working in another culture* were the top two motivational factors in taking an overseas assignment with 67% and 58% respectively. Not far behind, the opportunity to travel and a desire for adventure come in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> being mentioned as very important by the respondents 53 and 52% of the time. Lastly, the money (47%) that can be earned in international construction, along with the opportunity for professional development (45%), must be mentioned as a significant percentage of the respondents choosing them as very important when it comes to motivation behind accepting an overseas assignment.

Contrary to question 10, where the authors posed the question ‘What initially motivated you to take an overseas assignment?’ question 12 attempted to decipher what factors motivated people to continue working overseas (see figure 2). In other words, now that the individual is in this segment of the industry, what keeps them there? Money appears to be the motivational factor most often associated with a decision to stay with international construction, incorporating 41% of the surveyed individuals. The next closest motivational factor is the experience of living and working in another culture with 25% of the sample. Professional development, career advancement, family experience, travel, adventure, patriotism, and altruism were all less than 10%.

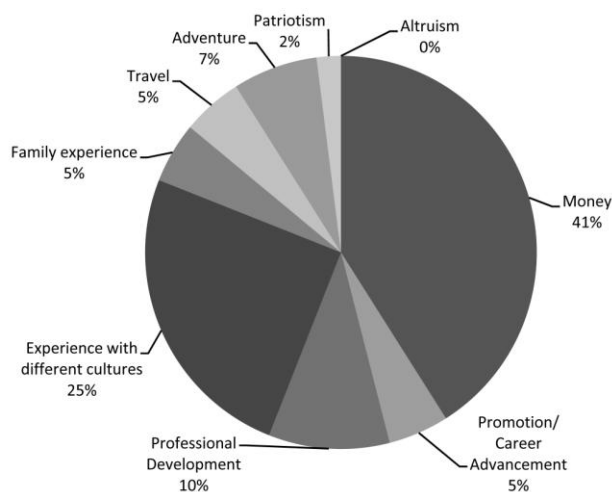


Figure 2: What motivated the respondents the most to continue working internationally

#### *International Assignments*

In the area of international assignments, 56% of those surveyed showed that they had no previous overseas experience before accepting their first international assignment, compared with 44% communicating they had overseas experience of some type before accepting their first assignment (see figure 3). Of the respondents answering YES, the right side of figure 3 details the percent break-down of the different types of international experiences, including 22% with personal and/or family travel, 17% conducting mission work, 17% with study abroad opportunities, and 44% claimed experience from being part of a military family.

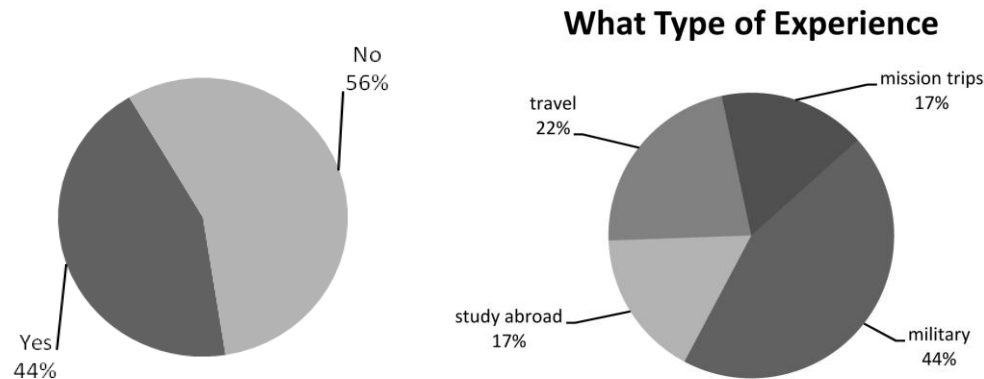


Figure 3: Previous overseas experience before accepting first international assignment

The analysis of question 19 summarized in figure 4, shows that a family situation is the leading cause of international assignment failures receiving just over 70% of the votes. Furthermore, country living conditions (45%) and other (47%) round out the top three, *very important factors* when determining what causes international assignment failure. Next are organizational factors and financial issues with 35% of the total respondents' votes, followed only by country culture (32%) and job duties (22%).

19. Please place a numerical rating by each of the following items for its importance in overseas assignment failure: (Select all that apply)					
Top number is the count of respondents selecting the option. Bottom % is percent of the total respondents selecting the option.	Not Important	Slightly Unimportant	Neutral	Slightly Important	Very Important
Family Situation	0 0%	0 0%	3 7%	9 22%	29 71%
Financial	1 2%	6 15%	6 15%	13 32%	14 35%
Job Duties	2 5%	3 8%	8 20%	18 45%	9 22%
Organizational	0 0%	2 5%	7 18%	17 42%	14 35%
Country: Culture	2 5%	5 12%	10 24%	11 27%	13 32%
Country: Living Conditions	1 2%	2 5%	10 24%	10 24%	19 45%
Other	0 0%	1 6%	3 18%	5 29%	8 47%

Figure 4: Importance in overseas assignment failure

Some of the reasons given by the respondents for the *other category* are as follows:

- Being mature enough to handle being away from family and or friends
- Safety and security
- Individual's personal morals and life habits after work hours
- Physical capability to perform the work in order to meet the expectations
- Ability to work well with Management and personality differences

In contrast to the *incitements*, there were a variety of *deterrents* listed by the respondents that were grouped into categories (see figure 5). In addition to the graph, one particular quote from the survey results

appeared to honestly portray the difficulties that would need to be overcome if any international assignment is to be a success:

People, who are averse to unclean conditions in their surrounding areas as would normally be encountered in an underdeveloped country, need not apply. People who are prejudiced against any religion, race or creed, need not apply. People who cannot stand separation from family and friends for extended periods will not make it.

According to the data collected, the specific deterrents mentioned were fairly evenly distributed, with the highest percentage (17%) to the failure of adapting to the sometimes drastically different living conditions around the world. Two other significant deterrents according to Figure 5 were (1) safety concerns/dangerous locations and (2) the time away from friends and family, which made-up 15% of the respondents'. In addition, the existence of single-status only contracts were fairly detrimental to the likelihood of someone pursuing, let alone accepting, international assignment. These are contracts in which the family are left in America while the employee moves to the host country. Lastly, political unrest/crime was the only other category that was mentioned by at least 10% of those surveyed.

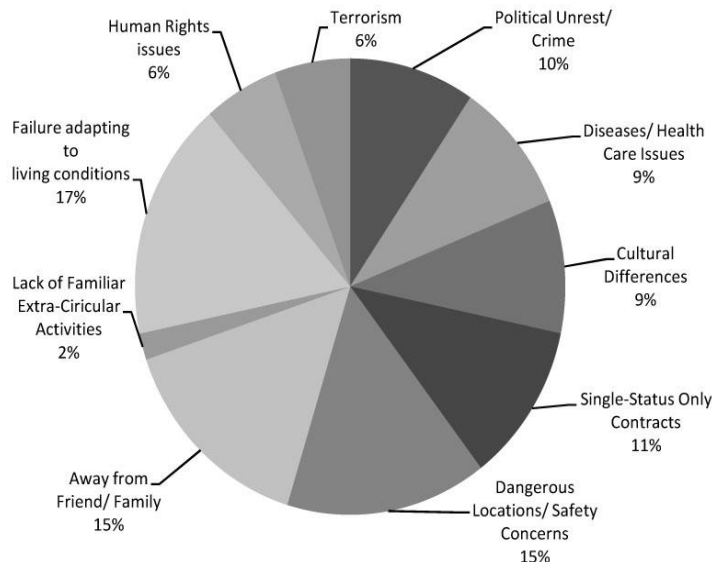


Figure 5: Deterrents for accepting international assignments

### *Personality Traits for International Construction Career*

The data from of Question 25, regarding the respondents' opinions of character/personality traits that professionals should possess to succeed on international assignments, is broken-down and summarized in Figure 6.

25. Select the character/personality attributes a professional should possess to succeed on international assignments. (Select all that apply)					
Top number is the count of respondents selecting the option. Bottom % is percent of the total respondents selecting the option.	Not Important	Slight Unimportant	Neutral	Slightly Important	Very Important
Open-Minded	0 0%	0 0%	1 2%	8 18%	35 80%
Spirit of Adventure	0 0%	1 2%	5 11%	14 32%	24 55%
Confidence	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	17 38%	28 62%
Desire to learn	0 0%	1 2%	6 14%	14 33%	21 50%
Self-motivated	0 0%	0 0%	4 9%	14 31%	27 60%
Team-player	0 0%	0 0%	2 5%	12 27%	30 68%
Technical Competency	0 0%	2 5%	7 16%	19 43%	16 36%
Other	0 0%	1 7%	0 0%	2 14%	11 79%

Figure 6: Characteristics/personality traits needed to succeed in international construction

The analysis of question 25 produces fairly consistent results. In other words, percentage-wise, most of the respondents felt that all the categories listed were very important concerning characteristic/personality traits that are needed by an individual to succeed internationally. According to Figure 6, all categories received 50% of the votes from the total survey respondents, except that of technical competency which was only deemed very important by 36% of the respondents. Open-mindedness tops the list, as far as percentages are concerned, with 80% of the respondents determining that this characteristic was the most important, slightly ahead of the 'other' category that accumulated 79% of the vote. The *Other category* was analyzed further below in Question 26:

- *Patient*
- *Detail oriented*: "Most international work is self-performed, NOT subcontracted. This requires overseas professionals to be proficient at all construction disciplines, which comes as a result of having a desire to learn and being detail oriented."
- *Durable/practical*: "In the sense that a person must be able to understand that the rest of the world may not desire the same standards that are found in the United States. Examples: transportation, convenience, space, public services..."
- *Flexible and high tolerance level*: "Ability to accept other cultures and their differences and to respect people of all races and religions."
- *Steady temperament*
- *Strong decision making skills*
- *Strong Morals & Convictions*
- *Creative*: "Overseas employees need to have a "thinking outside of the box" mentality. They will often be presented problems that require immediate and unique solutions. At the jobsite there may be a construction problem, and there is no "Home Depot" down the street and getting a replacement part might take months or cost thousands to have flown in. This requires a person who can think outside the box for a solution. The person must also be able to effectively plan their work ahead to insure the materials and people are available when the activity comes."

### Conclusions & Future Research

From the results of this study, it appears that there exist some common factors that affect construction professionals who pursue international assignments. Similar to Kramer & Dillard's (2009) exploratory research, technical skills, though mentioned by a small percentage of the respondents, are not believed to be very important when considering

important characteristics a professional should possess, at least initially, when deciding whether or not to accept an international position. In fact, mentioned by only 36% of those surveyed as important to success abroad, it was the lowest of all categories. It was more important for international assignees be open-minded, flexible, adaptable, and a team-player than anything else.

According to other studies on this subject, expatriates' attitudes have revealed low levels of salary satisfaction. One study noted in Bonache's (2005) article stated that 77% of expatriate employees are highly unsatisfied with the compensations packages offered by their employers, which was used to justify the high rates of expatriate failure. Though money was not the top motivational factor listed for those deciding whether to accept an *initial* international assignment, 41% of the total respondents stated that it was the prime factor determining their willingness to *continue* in international construction. When asked about the motivation behind accepting an initial international assignment, respondents claimed that the *personal challenge* and the *opportunity to experience different cultures* were the two most important factors. Additional motivational factors behind accepting an initial assignment abroad appear to be a *desire to travel* and a *need for adventure*.

Borstorff, et al. (1997) suggests that prior international experience appears to be associated with an employee's willingness to work overseas as an expatriate, however, our data analysis was not able to produce such conclusions. In our study, 56% of the respondents had no previous international experience before accepting their first position abroad. This is not to say that international exposure such as study abroad, missionary work, or being a part of a military family would not increase the likelihood of an individual successfully adapting to new cultures and new people, and therefore increasing the possibility of a successful assignment abroad.

A factor that was not considered in this study, but could be an area of future research, is that of spouse adaptation and its effects on the success or failure rates. Brett & Stroh (1995) concluded that the availability of American managers for international assignments depends not just on their preconceived ideas, but more importantly about the spouse's feelings about an international relocation. Apparently, an unhappy spouse will equal an unhappy expatriate, which in turn, will increase the likelihood of failure. Family situations are complex and if not specifically accounted for, have the ability to deteriorate the expatriate's job satisfaction and likelihood of seeing the assignment through to completion.

It is important to point out that future research on this topic should attempt to get more specific data results on non-work vs. work variables that affect international assignees as they not only deal with the difficulties of day to day operations, but their life outside of work. In addition, some specific topics that would be beneficial to address would include: 1) single vs. family-status contracts, 2) rotation sequencing, and 3) accommodations and meals. However, common themes have been identified in this study and the information might be helpful to multinational organizations when dealing with human resource policies and hiring decisions.

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