

Organizational support in the intercultural adjustment of accompanying spouses

Kia Buczek

Master's Thesis
Degree Programme in International Business Management
2019



Author(s) Kia Buczek	
Degree programme Master of International Business Management	
Report/thesis title Organizational support in the intercultural adjustment of accompanying spouses	Number of pages and appendix pages 64 + 9
<p>Globalization is making international assignments a necessity in multinational companies' strategies. Organizations recognize that they need to support the employee in the relocation process, but often forget to consider the needs of the accompanying spouse. One of the most cited reasons for a discontinuation of an international assignment is that the spouse was unable to adjust. This makes it a financial and strategic matter for organizations to understand the spouses' adjustment process better.</p> <p>The objective of this research is to find out what organizational support activities organizations can employ to improve expatriate spouses' relocation experiences and to help them in their intercultural adjustment. The secondary goals are to understand how the support activities are currently handled at Company X, how the spouses perceive the adjustment process and how well the support received corresponds to their needs.</p> <p>The theoretical framework presents general concepts and processes related to international assignments and intercultural adjustment. This study is concentrated on the situation of Company X, and the experiences of their expatriates' spouses. The particular focus is on how organizational support could assist in the intercultural adjustment of the spouses when they relocate to Finland.</p> <p>This study used qualitative methods with a cross-sectional time horizon to uncover participants' experiences. Data were collected from four accompanying spouses with semi-structured theme interviews from July-August 2018. In order to test the model drafted, an event to support social interaction was implemented as part of the development project in March 2019, along with a group interview session with four accompanying spouses. Based on the literature review and interview results, development recommendations were provided to Company X.</p> <p>This study found that the main factors that contribute to the spouse adjustment are 1) personal, 2) social, 3) cultural, and 4) work factors. Effective organizational support plays a significant role in the positive intercultural adjustment of the spouse, especially since the company representative is initially one of the main support contacts spouses have in the new country. Merely providing the very basic practical assistance is not sufficient, and it is important that spouses feel valued by the organization. The results suggested that the two areas where spouses need assistance the most are practical matters throughout the assignment and support in the social aspects of the adjustment.</p> <p>In conclusion, spouses do not have the structure and routine that work brings to the expatriate, and they often need to build their social network from ground up by themselves. Relocation to a new country can feel taxing psychologically, and some cope better with stress than others. This means the level of support needed is dependent on the individual and therefore the support activities need to be tailored case by case.</p>	
Keywords Organizational Support, Intercultural Adjustment, Accompanying Spouse, International Assignment	

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1 Introduction

Globalization is making global mobility a necessity in multinational companies' strategies. Filling talent gaps, retaining talent, gaining a competitive advantage, and responding to business needs are just some of the reasons for sending employees abroad. International assignments have become more and more frequent, and the population of mobile employees is ever increasing. Both employers and employees see international experience valuable and attractive.

When relocating to a new country, employees and their family members will need to adjust to the new environment, culture and habits. Organizations recognize that they need to support the employee in the relocation process, but often forget that the assignment will also affect the life of the accompanying spouse. The assignment policies and practices of the organizations have a significant impact on the spouses, even though they are not employed by the organization themselves. Therefore it is suggested that organizational support should also be extended to the spouses. (McNulty 2012, 420.)

One of the most cited reasons for a discontinuation of an international assignment is that the family was unable to adjust or did not enjoy the life in the new country (Andreason 2003, 550; BGRS 2016, 63; McNulty 2012, 418; Takeuchi 2010, 1044). This makes it a financial and strategic matter for organizations to understand the spouses' adjustment process better.

This study focused on how the case company could support spouses in their intercultural adjustment process. The thesis presents general concepts and processes of international assignments and cross-cultural adjustment as well as experiences of accompanying spouses. The case company wishes to remain anonymous and therefore will be called Company X from this point forward.

In this research the spouses of Company X expatriates were interviewed, as well as the Company X HR Coordinator and the Company X Assignment Training Coach. Based on the theoretical framework and data analysis, suggestions on how Company X could support expatriate spouses in their adjustment to life in Finland were derived and are presented in this thesis report.

1.1 Objective, overview and timeline of the research process

This study collected information about the adjustment process of spouses whose partner relocates to Finland for work. The goal was to find ways for Company X to make the relocation and adjustment process better for the spouses, which in turn may help the relocating employees focus on their work and improve job satisfaction.

The scope of this study is Company X and the experiences of their expatriates' spouses, with a particular focus on organizational activities that could assist in the intercultural adjustment of the spouses when they relocate to Finland.

In this development study project, I set out to answer the question, "How can Company X support expatriate employees' spouses in their adjustment process?"

To answer the main research question, this study focused on four sub-questions:

1. What are the main factors that affect the adjustment of the spouses of expatriate employees during an international assignment?
2. In addition to these general factors, what unique challenges do these spouses face when moving to Finland specifically?
3. What can firms in general do to improve the adjustment of their employees' spouses during international assignments?
4. What sort of initiative could Company X utilize to improve their expatriate spouses' adjustment?

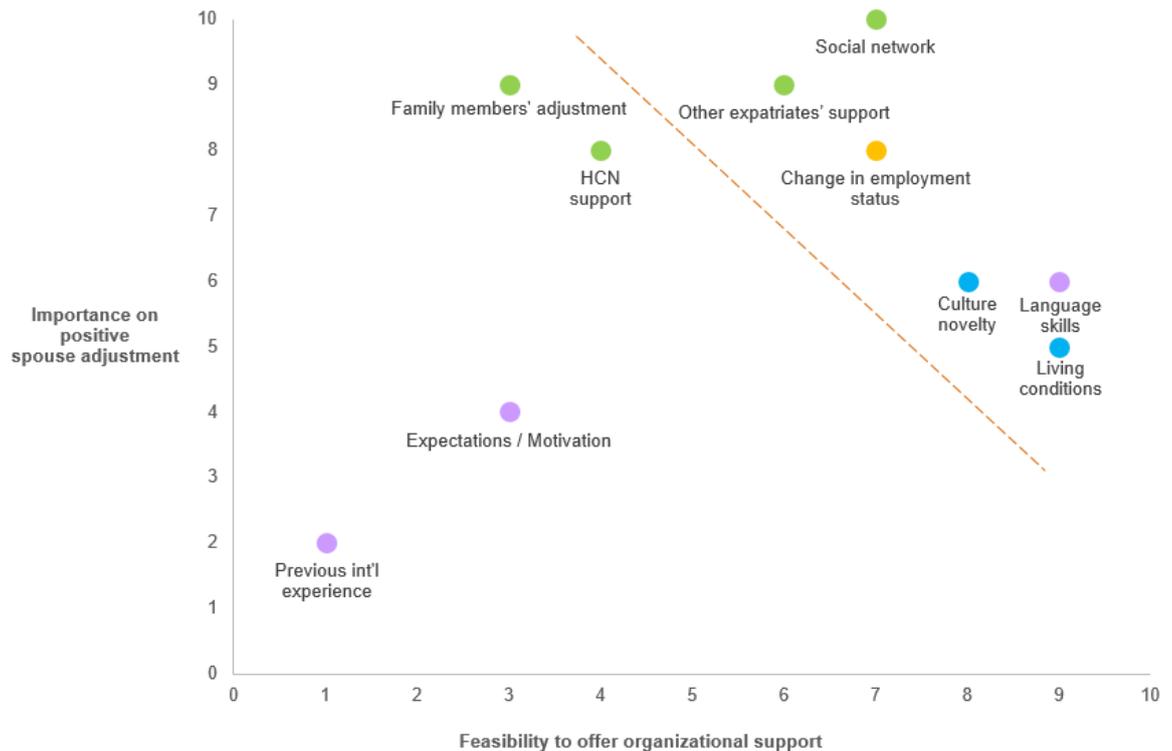
To answer questions 1 and 3, I needed to examine literature and existing theories, and to effectively answer questions 2 and 4, I needed to explore the experiences of Company X expatriates' spouses. To dive further into the topics of questions 3 and 4, I needed to familiarize myself with Company X's policies and practices.

During the literature review, my research led me to the "Theory of international adjustment" as described by Black, Mendenhall & Oddou (1991) and the "Model of spouse adjustment to international assignments" as proposed by Shaffer & Harrison (2001).

While these theories were insightful, they did not provide me with enough information about my question in the specific context of Company X, and therefore I needed to collect more information through qualitative interviews. In this regard, I interviewed two employ-

ees of Company X whose task it was to support the expatriates, as well spouses themselves who had firsthand experience with the challenges of relocating to a new country with their expatriate partner.

Now that I had collected both enough theoretical information through the literature review, and qualitative data through the interviews, I was ready to develop and propose a framework, which helped in answering the research question. The framework on spouse adjustment is expanded upon in Chapter 2.5. To assist Company X on deciding what activities to take on to support the spouses, I created a model for organizational support. Briefly, this model suggested that Company X could best utilize its limited resources by mapping out potential solutions on an X-Y axis chart, where X measured feasibility for the company to provide support, and Y measured importance on positive spouse adjustment. Below is a caption of the model from Chapter 4.8.



The company should focus on providing actions that support the spouses in the factors above the dotted line, which influence their adjustment

With the factors that Company X should potentially focus implementing support initiatives for spouses now mapped, I wanted to test to see if the model worked. It would of course be impossible to test every initiative, or to test the model over a variety of scenarios, but I at least wanted to test one initiative, which would provide support in a factor identified in the model as “High Importance, High Feasibility”, to see if it brought value to the spouses.

This would help Company X to understand if it was at least worth testing this model further in the future.

The initiative I decided, together with Company X, to test in the real world was a networking event for spouses currently in Finland. At this event, the spouses had a chance to informally network for a period of time, and then I presented this research topic to them. After the event, we sat together and had a more formal discussion around their experiences as accompanying spouses, covering both the positive and negative aspects of life in Finland in a group interview. We also discussed topics such as integrating into the country, learning the local language and culture, and creating a new social network.

The feedback from the participants on the networking event was positive. Based on the success of the event, and the success of the model to identify a worthwhile and affordable initiative for improving the lives of Company X's accompanying spouses, I made concrete recommendations for Company X moving forward. They are described in detail in Chapter 5. I also made recommendations on which initiatives should be the next steps going forward. The next steps are discussed in Chapter 6.1, but briefly, they are:

- 1) Set up an email account, which is monitored by multiple people, and provide the email address to all internal expatriates and spouses to provide support.
- 2) Set up internal guidelines on when and how to provide guidance on job searching for incoming spouses.
- 3) Set up assignment training for all incoming expatriates and their spouses.
- 4) Ensure that the offer to take Finnish language courses presented to expatriates is extended to the spouses as well.
- 5) Come up with four themes for networking events, of which two are held in the spring, and two in the fall. Both internal expatriate spouses and clients' expatriates and their spouses should be invited to allow more wide contact base for networking. This would also provide a benefit to clients of Company X.

While I think these are good proposals, I think it is also important to highlight some limitations of the work of this study. Specifically, the scope of this study was only to build the model and test one initiative. To really understand if the proposed model is strong, Company X will have to test it with a wide variety of initiatives and over a longer period of time. Also, the model only focuses on two main elements (Feasibility, and Importance on positive spouse adjustment), and therefore Company X should also consider if any other elements should be integrated into their decision-making process around this problem.

To summarize, I believe this study was overall a very good look into Company X’s challenges, and provides them a good path forward for improving the services they provide to the expatriates and the accompanying spouses. There is more work to be done, but they now have a framework and a model in which they can test new ideas and build a more comprehensive service package for both internal and external accompanying spouses.

The timeline of the project is chronologically graphed in Figure 1 below.

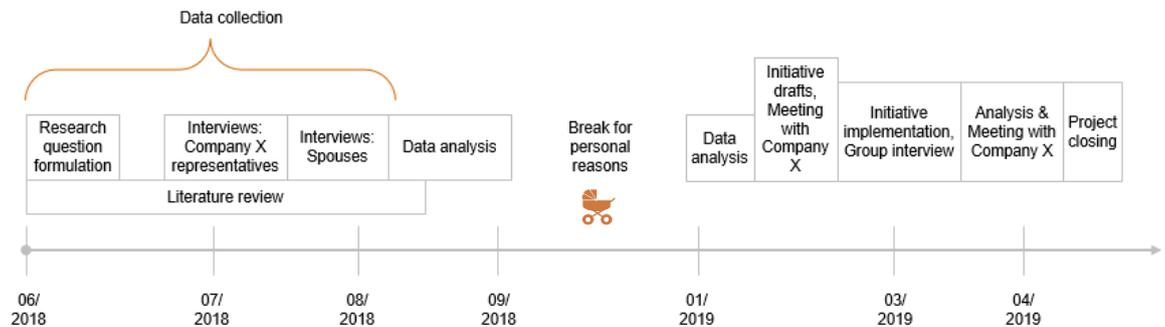


Figure 1. Development study project timeline

1.2 Background for the study and case company introduction

The sponsor case company, Company X, is one of the leading professional services organizations in the world with more than 223 000 employees in 157 countries in 2018. The firm provides services to growing businesses, family businesses, listed companies and public organizations.

Company X also offers services related to international mobility, the direct clients being most often the companies’ HR representatives and/or employees whom are either embarking on an assignment, are already abroad, or are returning from an assignment. When professional employees are required to work cross-border and remotely, there is a need to make sure some key issues are taken care of, such as international taxation, international payroll, immigration, relocation, cross-cultural training, international company policies, and assignment contracts. These issues often require special expertise, which companies do not possess, and it would take them a considerable time and effort to tackle them themselves (Andreason 2003, 554). This is where professional consulting companies such as Company X often step in.

When an expatriate moves from one country to another, their employer’s HR department usually assists them with the relocation process. The scope of services varies company by company and is generally determined in the international assignment policy, if the com-

pany has an existing policy in place. The scope can be determined in the assignment contract as well, which is a contract between the employee and employer drafted for the period of the assignment. Usually the scope is quite limited, and the assistance is restricted to very basic services, such as work and/or residence permit applications, apartment search, and possible school assistance for the kids, to name a few. The services focus on bringing the employee and accompanying family to Finland, and to set up the basic matters needed for the employee to start working in Finland. Support for spouse in, for example, job searching or finding networks in the new country is usually not included in the basic scope of services. This last statement is true to Company X as well. (Interviewee B 26 July 2018).

Company X itself has a global platform for international assignment opportunities. Local branches post job openings in the global intranet site, and employees can search for positions suitable for their own career aspirations. Employees will then apply for the position, and once accepted, will begin planning for the assignment with their HR department. The home company HR is in contact with the future host company HR, and together they kick-start the process. The process moves fast after the employee has accepted the offer. They usually have only a few months to prepare before their assignment begins. (Interviewee B 26 July 2018.)

At the time of beginning this research in June 2018, Company X employed several expatriates in Finland, and the amount was growing. Most of the assignees who brought their family along relocated from the US. The expatriates usually spend two to three years on the assignment. Company X's HR Global Mobility team handles issues related to these moves, and usually this includes services such as finding housing, escorting the employee and family to apartment showings, aiding with rental contracts, setting up utilities, opening up bank accounts, helping with finding the right schools for children, aiding with registrations with the authorities, accompanying the family to the grocery store and helping them understand other basic aspects around daily life in Finland. The assistance is usually limited to the beginning of the process and to the practical administrative work. At the moment of conducting this research, there were two team members in Company X's HR Global Mobility team; HR Coordinator and a trainee. (Interviewee B 26 July 2018.)

This practical support at the beginning of the assignment has been very helpful to the expatriates and their families, but has usually been limited to the initial stages of the process. After the first month of living in Finland, the family may find themselves having to figure things out on their own. The assistance is generally also geared towards the em-

employee, and not the spouse. For example, a phone plan is offered and set up for the employee, but not for the spouse and Finnish language courses are offered only to the expatriate. The spouse may not have a direct contact to the HR Global Mobility Team representative, and thus the possible questions, if any, will come through the employee. (Interviewee B 26 July 2018.) In addition to the everyday practicalities, there can be other issues spouses face with which they could use help. For instance, struggling to find a job, health issues, or feeling lonely or even depressed if not able to create a network or form relationships for whatever reason. (Interviewee A 18 July 2018.)

Company X wants the relocation process to run smoothly and ensure that the employees are satisfied with the service in order to retain the employees for the whole duration of their assignment. The adjustment of the spouse is an important factor to consider for the satisfaction of the employee. If the spouse is not happy with life in Finland or if they need a lot of support from the employee, it can greatly affect the employee's satisfaction, stress level, and efficiency at work. (Interviewee B 26 July 2018.) Company X has put a lot of effort into promoting a healthy work-life balance for their employees in recent years. Firms tend to see spousal support as a mere extra cost, but spousal assistance is a form of support to making sure employees have the healthy balance they need to perform well in their work. (Interviewee A 18 July 2018.)

Company X provides relocation services to their external clients as well. Once Company X finds out how they can make the adjustment process easier for their own employees, they can utilize the same tactics with their external clients. There is a clear business case for this study in that sense.

Company X also provides intercultural competence and country specific assignment training for their external clients' employees going abroad (Interviewee A 18 July 2018). Having worked with external expatriate clients and in connection with discussing with our coaches, I have realized the importance of preparing the expatriates and their family members to the upcoming changes. Knowing that Company X has not offered these services to all of their internal expatriates and spouses in the past suggests that there could be room for improvement in their internal process (Interviewee B 26 July 2018).

Generally, the problem for companies seems to be that the organization, outside of the HR's Global Mobility function, might not recognize the importance of making sure the whole family is doing well in international assignment situations (Cole 2011, 1525). This leads to problems such as not allocating enough resources to make sure the expats and their spouses are supported well enough, and not including enough support for family

members in the international assignment policies. (Interviewee A 18 July 2018; McNulty 2012, 420.)

1.3 Report structure

The theory part in Chapter 2 of this report presents general concepts and processes of international assignments and intercultural adjustment. It also investigates the different forms of organizational support that organizations can provide to expatriates and their families in international assignment situations.

Chapter 3 presents the survey methodology and sheds light on the choice of strategies for this study development process. This chapter also presents the implementation of the initiative project.

Experiences on adjustment process were derived by interviewing accompanying spouses to understand which practices are successful and to find out the development needs. The results of the spouse interviews are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 outlines development suggestions made to Company X, and Chapter 6 discusses the outcomes and ethics of the research, suggestions for further research and my personal learnings.

1.4 Definition of key concepts

Global mobility in business terms means organizations moving employees from one country to another for work. The term used for this period of working abroad is **international assignment**. An international assignment can be short-term or long-term. If the assignment is shorter than 30 days, one is generally speaking about business travel instead of an assignment. The duration of a short-term assignment varies from company to company, but typically short-term assignments last up to one year. Long-term assignments are one year or longer in duration. (PwC 2017, 7). If the assignment is extended beyond four or five years, localization is sometimes an option. Localization means that the employee is transferred permanently to the host organization.

An **expatriate** is a person temporarily or permanently living outside their native country. The term is also generally used to describe an employee working abroad on an assignment. For the sake of clarity and to differentiate them from the spouses, Company X's employees are called expatriates in this report.

Accompanying spouse is a term used of a dependent family member, usually either a married partner or a common-law partner, who joins the expatriate employee on their international work assignment. In this report, the term “spouse” is used to describe all accompanying dependent partners, whether married or not.

Intercultural adjustment process can be defined as the level of psychological comfort with different aspects of the host country. Uncertainty of not knowing how to behave in the new culture inhibits adjustment, and factors that reduce this uncertainty support adjustment. (Black & Gregersen 1991, 463; Oberg 1960, 177.)

Assignment training's purpose is to prepare the expatriate for the challenges in intercultural working environment and in understanding how one's own culture affects interaction with locals. The training can also include elements related to country-specific factors, such as local culture and habits, and in that case the training is usually called **culture specific intercultural** or **cross-cultural training**, or **cultural training**. (Interviewee A 18 July 2018.)

2 Global mobility and ensuing intercultural adjustment

Global business is facing challenges with changing demographics, for example declining population in Europe and aging workforce in China, which creates a talent gap (PwC 2010, 7). A talent gap forms when there is not enough skilled workforce to fill available jobs in organizations. Global mobility is one way to fill these skill gaps for governments and organizations. PwC estimated in 2010 that international assignments would increase by 50% by 2020 (PwC 2010, 6-10). This chapter will discuss reasons for international assignments, theory behind the intercultural adjustment process, and what type of organizational support is generally offered in international assignment situations.

2.1 International assignments

When organizations become more global, they opt to use international assignments as part of their talent management and development for employee retention, to meet business needs in the host country, and to transfer knowledge and experience between the home and host companies (PwC 2017, 54). In a global business environment, it is important that employees gain an understanding of more than just the domestic market (Black & Gregersen 1991, 462). Multinational firms see employees with cross-cultural proficiency as an asset (Forbes 2013).

For the employee, an international assignment has many potential benefits: financial opportunity, career advancement, and a possible promotion at the end of the assignment (PwC & Cranfield University 2011, 16). International assignments help to increase intercultural awareness and broaden general worldview, provide an opportunity to learn foreign languages, and expand the professional network (Forbes 2013).

Organizations view international assignments as big investments. According to a study by PwC and Cranfield University (2011, 22), the compensation paid to expatriates is generally greater than that paid to their non-expatriated peers. This does not include other possible expenses such as outsourced assistance for immigration, tax and other compliance support, or relocation costs such as removal of goods. It is estimated, that the cost of an expatriate employee is three to five times that if the employee was to stay in the home country (Andreason 2003, 548).

Companies tend to prepare pre-assignment cost projections, and see the cost projection as an important factor in the decision on whether to proceed with the international assignment or not (PwC 2017, 60). Assignment cost projection is a calculation, which aims to estimate what the overall cost and taxes of the international assignment would be to help the

organization to make a go/no-go decision for the assignment. An example of a cost projection calculation can be seen in Figure 2 below. The calculation usually includes items such as employee's compensation-related elements, relocation costs, annual costs (such as host country housing, tax compliance, home leave; in other words plane tickets), and estimated tax and social security liability. (Cartus 2016; Ernst & Young LLP 2013; KPMG 2017.)

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT COST PROJECTION REPORT

Summary Report For Sample Template Assignment from the United States to Poland Prepared on Thursday, March 03, 2011						
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total
Base Compensation:						
Salary	75,616	154,500	159,135	81,281	0	470,532
Bonuses	0	15,577	31,827	32,782	16,744	96,930
Total Compensation	75,616	170,077	190,962	114,063	16,744	567,462
Allowances:						
Cost of Living Allowance	8,744	17,865	18,401	9,399	0	54,409
Net Housing Allowance	7,023	14,350	14,781	7,550	0	43,704
Automobile Allowance	3,747	7,656	7,886	4,028	0	23,317
Moving Expense Reimbursement	144,412	5,150	5,305	82,775	0	237,642
Home Leave	6,280	6,468	6,662	6,862	0	26,272
Education Allowance	20,164	41,200	42,436	21,675	0	125,475
Expatriate Premium	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hardship Premium	7,562	15,450	15,914	8,128	0	47,054
Home Management/Maintenance	2,521	5,150	5,305	2,710	0	15,686
Club Membership/Fees	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tax Services Provided	5,000	5,150	5,305	5,464	0	20,919
Total Allowances	205,453	118,439	121,995	148,591	0	594,478
Tax Costs:						
Actual Tax Liabilities:						
U.S. Federal	26,693	4,146	0	25,993	54,667	111,499
U.S. FICA	9,204	11,585	13,235	14,041	14,065	62,130
Illinois	5,065	740	0	4,039	15,167	25,011
Poland Income Tax	46,763	68,452	80,360	73,773	67,604	336,952
Poland Social Insurance	28,479	40,723	46,376	41,269	0	156,847
Total Actual Tax	116,204	125,646	139,971	159,115	151,503	692,439
Less Hypothetical Tax:						
U.S. Federal Tax	(26,800)	(29,767)	(32,805)	(34,368)	(44,392)	(168,132)
U.S. FICA	(7,096)	(9,310)	(9,391)	(9,474)	(9,560)	(44,831)
Illinois	(8,600)	(8,870)	(9,148)	(9,435)	(7,297)	(43,350)
Total Hypothetical Tax	(42,496)	(47,947)	(51,344)	(53,277)	(61,249)	(256,313)
Employer's Soc Ins - United States	3,354	11,585	12,091	11,390	3,286	41,706
Employer's Soc Ins - Poland	16,816	24,863	27,908	23,684	0	93,271
Tax Cost to Company	93,878	114,147	128,626	140,912	93,540	571,103
TOTAL COSTS	374,947	402,663	441,583	403,566	110,284	1,733,043
Assignment Period: 7/1/2011 through 6/30/2014 Report Denominated In: U.S. Dollars						

Figure 2. Sample assignment cost projection report (Mercer LLC 2014)

Companies want to make sure the assignments are successful, because failed and inefficient assignments create significant direct and indirect costs (Black & Gregersen 1991, 463; Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi & Bross 1998, 598). Direct costs are the monetary investments made to send to and maintain an employee in the host location. Indirect costs can be, for example, loss of market share and severed relationships with clients, local business partners or government officials in host location. (Andreason 2003, 548.) Families not being able to adjust to the new host country is one of the main cited reasons for failed or discontinued assignments (Andreason 2003, 552; Caligiuri & al. 1998, 598; McNulty 2012, 418; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012, 61; Takeuchi 2010, 1044). In BGRS's (2016, 63) Global Mobility Trend Survey, family related issues were referred as number one reason for assignments not going as planned (33%) as can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Reasons for Assignments Failure (BGRS 2016, 63)

33% Family related issues
18% Poor candidate selection
18% Cannot adapt to host location
14% Job expectations not met
7% Compensation-related dissatisfaction
5% Quality of life
4% Security/safety concerns

Research has shown that the adjustment of the spouses of expatriate employees has a clearly positive link to the adjustment of the expatriate employees themselves (Black & al. 1991, 312; Shaffer, Harrison & Gilley 1999, 574). And vice versa, if the spouse and family have a difficult time adjusting, it may contribute to the failure of the assignment for the expatriate employee (McNulty 2012, 418).

2.2 Intercultural adjustment process

Much of the earlier theory on cross-cultural adjustment was based on Oberg's (1960) research on culture shock. The theory is that a person goes through different stages of adjustment to their new living environment, and the adjustment follows a so-called U-curve. The first stage is called the Honeymoon phase, which can last anywhere from a couple days to some months. This is when the person arrives to a new country and finds everything exciting and positive. (Interviewee A 18 July 2018; Oberg 1960, 177.)

The second stage is Crisis phase, when the practical issues and problems start arising. The expatriate may start to compare the new country and home country in a negative

light; they might feel that the customs in the host country are worse than those they are used to at home (Oberg 1960, 178). The expatriate might feel home sick, and even question why they ever came abroad in the first place (Interviewee A 18 July 2018).

After the problematic stage, the person will start to be more acquainted with the local ways, potentially learn some of the language and starts looking at things with humor. This Regression stage precedes Adjustment stage at which the person accepts the local culture and its ways of operating. (Oberg 1960, 177.) The culture shock U-curve theory is visualized in Figure 3 below.

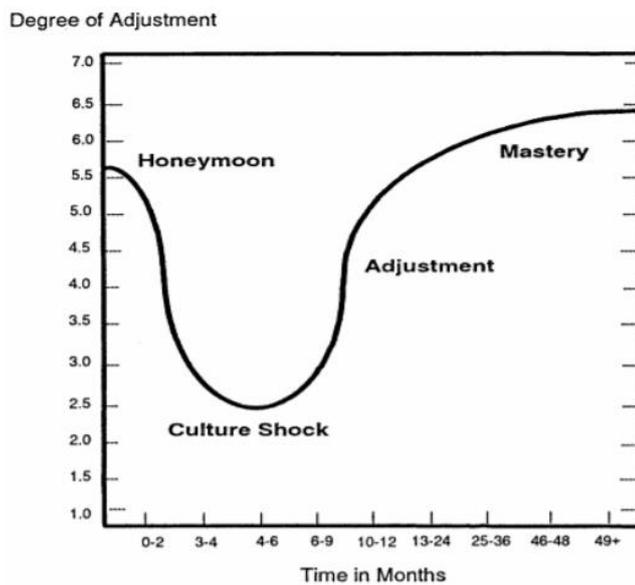


Figure 3. Depiction of Oberg's U-Curve of Cross-Cultural Adjustment (Martinsen 2007, 43)

The U-curve theory is seen as one-dimensional, and not taking into account the various levels of adjustment required to fully become interculturally aware (Black & Gregersen 1991, 463).

Black and Gregersen (1991, 463) characterize the intercultural adjustment process as the level of psychological comfort with different aspects of the host country. Culture shock can be seen as uncertainty brought on by not knowing how to behave in the new culture (Black & Gregersen 1991, 463; Oberg 1960, 177). Adjustment is eased by factors that reduce this uncertainty.

Some newer theories claim that intercultural adjustment is multidimensional. Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) created a model, which suggests there are three main dimensions to intercultural adjustment: 1) general/cultural adjustment, 2) interactional adjustment, and 3) work adjustment. *General adjustment* refers to the living conditions and

culture of the host country, for example healthcare, climate, and customs. *Interactional adjustment* relates to interacting with the locals. *Work adjustment* means adjustment to the new job requirements in host country. (Cole 2011, 1505; Shaffer & al. 1999, 560.)

Black, Mendenhall & Oddou (1991, 303) suggest in their model that these three dimensions have different factors, which influence the expatriate adjustment, and that these factors can be divided to anticipatory and in-country adjustment as can be seen in Figure 4 below.

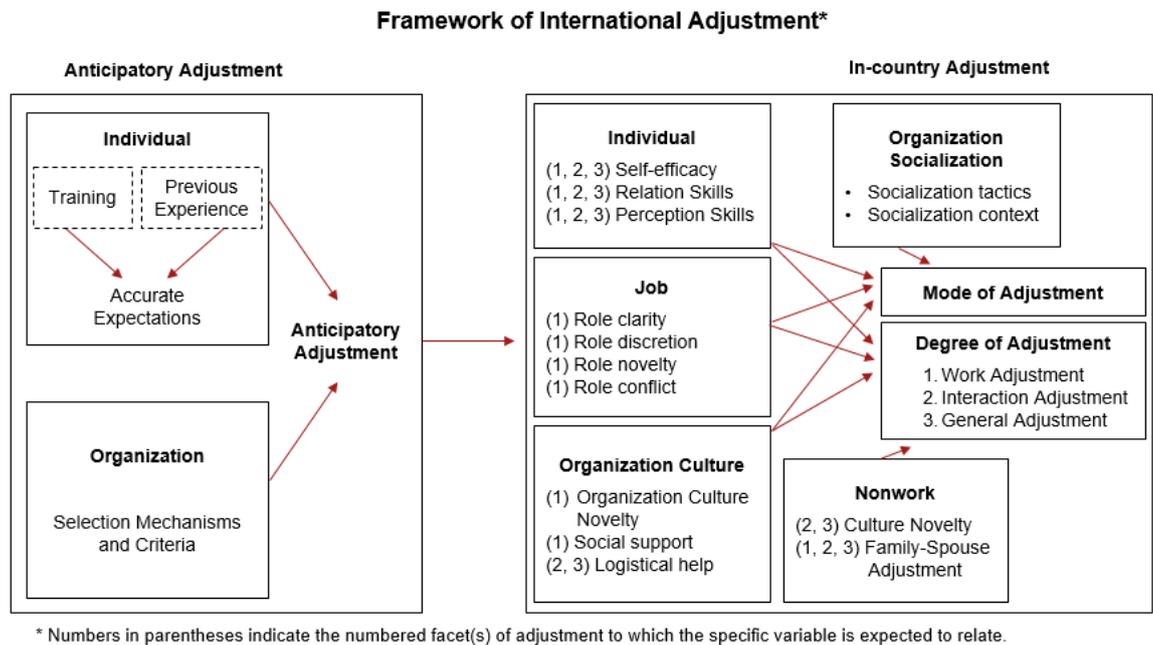


Figure 4. Framework of International Adjustment (modified Black & al. 1991, 303)

According to the model, anticipatory factors include previous experience from overseas, pre-departure training, and organizational selection mechanisms. The in-country factors include individual skills, job role, organization culture and nonwork related themes. All these components contribute to the adjustment of an expatriate employee. (Black & al. 1991, 293.)

Training and previous experience

If the expatriate has received cross-cultural training and/or language training prior to relocation, or they have previously been on an assignment somewhere else, it will help them to know what to expect from the new assignment. Having realistic expectations of the upcoming assignment can facilitate adjustment. This anticipatory preparation can also contribute to their individual skills. These skills will aid in the adjustment process after arrival. (Black & al. 1991, 294.)

Organization selection mechanisms and criteria

In their talent management programs, organizations should focus on finding the correct employees to send on assignments. Not everyone has the key skills necessary to succeed. Black, Mendenhall & Oddou (1991, 294) claim focusing on finding candidates with cross-cultural skills will facilitate successful assignments as these persons are more likely to adjust in the new culture.

Individual skills

After arrival, the expatriate's individual skills contribute to the adjustment process. Self-efficacy means how well a person can deal with stressful situations and maintain their psychological well-being, relation skills measure how the expatriate maintains social relationships with locals, and perception skills how well the expatriate observes and assesses the new environment and its actors. (Black & al. 1991, 294.)

Job

The job related factors describe how the expatriate succeeds in the different aspects of their new role. Understanding what is expected of the expatriate in the new role, and having role discretion, which means adapting the new role to themselves and being able to utilize prior experiences and patterns in handling it both positively impact adjustment. On the other hand, receiving mixed signals about the expectations of the new role and experiencing role novelty, in other words the new role differing from past roles, will create uncertainty and thus hinder adjustment. (Black & al. 1991, 309.)

Organization culture

If the host country company's organizational culture greatly differs from that of the home country company's, it will create uncertainty in the expatriate's behavior. This will also affect intercultural adjustment in the country. If the co-workers and supervisors of the host country company offer social support to the expatriate and help with the social cues and behavior expectations of the organizational setting, it will help the expatriate with the adjustment. The organization's logistical support with, for example, finding accommodation or schools for the kids, aiding with local registrations and other administrative works, will also positively affect the adjustment of the expatriate. (Black & al. 1991, 311.)

Nonwork

Culture novelty means that the more the host country culture differs from that of the home country culture, the more difficult it is for the expatriate to adjust. Culture novelty is supposedly a stronger influence on adjustment in the first two years of the assignment, after which the impact lessens. (Black & al. 1991, 295.) Spouse and family's poor cross-cultural

adjustment can have a spillover effect on the expatriate's own intercultural adjustment with negative effects (Black & al. 1991, 312).

As mentioned earlier, according to the model, expatriate's intercultural adjustment has three dimensions: work, interaction with the locals, and general environment (Black & Gregersen 1991). Black, Mendenhall & Oddou (1991, 303) explain that the in-country factors influence various degrees of adjustment. For example, culture novelty would have an impact on interaction and general adjustment, but not so much work adjustment, whereas job related factors only contribute to the work adjustment and not to the interaction and general adjustment. All of the relationships between factors and degrees of adjustment can be examined in Figure 4.

In the Black & al. (1991) framework for international adjustment, the different factors have influence over the three dimensions (Work, Interaction, General). Takeuchi, Yun and Tesluk (2002) expand the model in their publishing claiming that the three adjustment dimensions most likely are not independent, but in fact interact with each other creating spillover effects. This means that intercultural adjustment in one dimension can influence adjustment in another dimension. In addition, research found that the spouse's general adjustment has a strong spillover effect to the expatriate's adjustment, and vice versa (Caligiuri & al. 1998, 601; Cole 2011, 1506).

2.3 Factors affecting the adjustment process of a spouse

According to Adler (2008, 314), the expatriate's spouse has an even harder role with adjusting than the expatriate, considering that the expatriate is usually occupied by work and has the safety of the organization and job structure behind them. The spouse will leave all familiar constructs behind, and is often more immersed in the new culture and the cultural differences than the expatriate is (Adler 2008, 314). The spouse needs to function with no familiar support network of extended family and friends, often has no host country language skills or cultural training, and sometimes experiences loss of financial independence (Andreason 2003, 552; Caligiuri & al. 1998, 602).

2.3.1 Identity re-construction

Shaffer and Harrison (2001) created and tested a model for expatriate spouse adjustment based on the work Black and Gregersen (1991, 463) presented. The proposed model can be seen in Figure 5. The attempt was to find factors that either facilitate or hinder spouse adjustment on international assignments (Shaffer & Harrison 2001, 239).

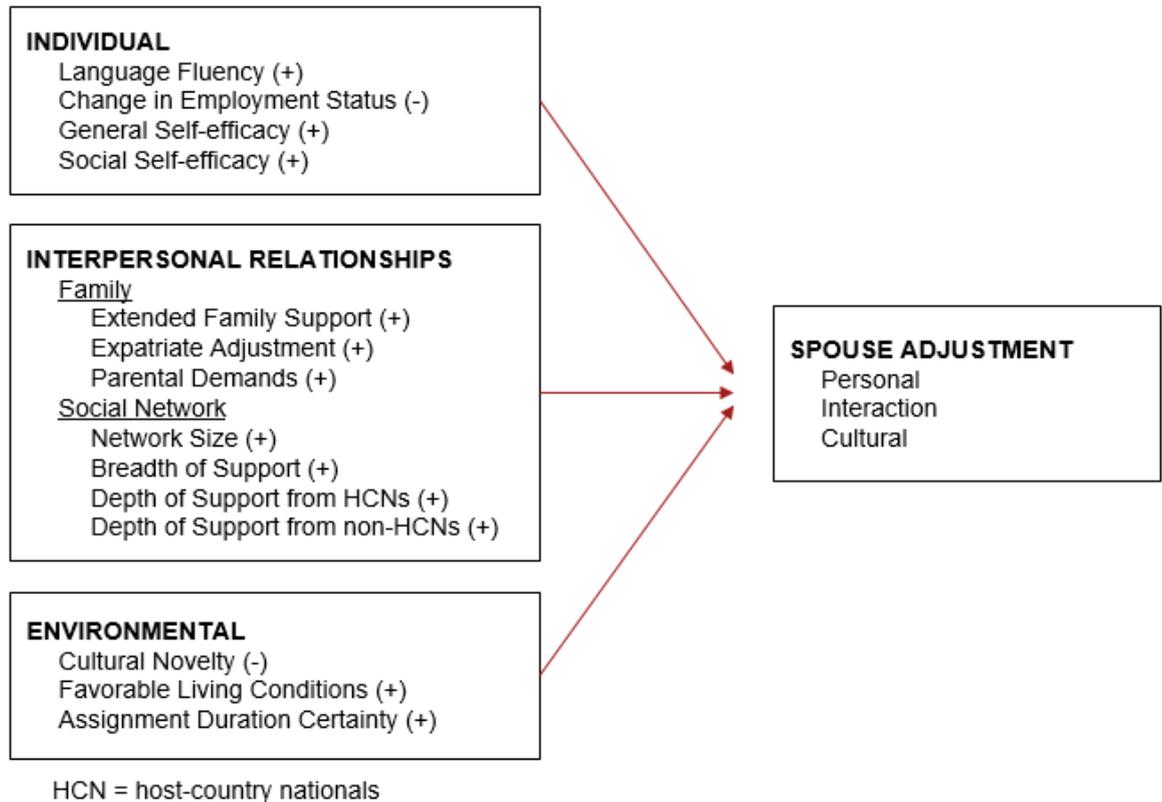


Figure 5. Proposed model of spouse adjustment to international assignments (modified Shaffer & Harrison 2001, 245)

Shaffer and Harrison (2001) concluded that unlike in the Black & al. (1991) expatriate adjustment model, the spouse adjustment is not just about the level of the person's psychological comfort to the new environment, but instead it is about new identity creation. This means that when an expatriate spouse relocates to a new country, often the spouse's personal and social role and tasks change significantly (McNulty 2012, 420). For example, in their home country, the spouse may have had a career, but in the host country, they may stay at home instead. As a result, the spouse may undergo some form of disruption in their identity (Caligiuri & al. 1998, 602). Depending on the severity of the disruption, they will either experience a change in the clarity of their identity, or begin a process of building a new identity altogether. This reformation of one's personal identity has various aspects, which affect the spouse's intercultural adjustment in the new environment. (McNulty 2012, 420; Shaffer & Harrison 2001, 239-241.)

After testing the model, Shaffer and Harrison (2001) found that unlike in their proposed model, perceived skills (general and social self-efficacy), extended family support and prior jobs had either no effect or negative effect on the adjustment in the host country as they are remnants of the spouse's previous identity. In contrast, reforming one's identity

by gaining host country language fluency and creating a vast and deep local social network (both HCN and non-HCN actors) contributed positively to intercultural adjustment. (Shaffer & Harrison 2001, 252.)

McNulty (2012) builds on Shaffer and Harrison's (2001) theory of identity disruption. In their research, they suggest that two main concerns influence spouse's identity reconstruction: 1) dual-career issues and 2) marital stress. Spouse adjustment to the new culture can be negatively impacted by loss of social networks and extended family support, as well as being forced to take a hiatus from their career and experience unemployment, which in turn can sometimes result in them not having financial independence (Andreason 2003, 552; Cole 2011, 1506). This results in changes in the family dynamics as roles and responsibilities shift (Cole 2011, 1506; McNulty 2012, 420).

The spouse adjustment process has been described in research as "individuals balancing demands against capabilities" (Caligiuri & al. 1998; Haslberger & Brewster 2008; McNulty 2012). The demands for a spouse can include 1) *stressors*, which are one-off events such as the act of moving abroad, 2) *strains*, which are ongoing unsolved pressures stemming from stressors that reveal themselves after some time, such as giving up career or change in financial status, and 3) *daily hassles*, such as dealing with practicalities or communicating with locals in a foreign language. (Caligiuri & al. 1998, 600; McNulty 2012, 420.) The capabilities can include coping behaviors derived from 1) *emotional resources*, such as friendships, clubs, and other social forums, 2) *informational resources*, such as organizational support in finding employment, and 3) *instrumental resources*, such as residence permits or relocation allowances. "Socio cultural brokerage" is also mentioned as one resource; it means that other individuals are facilitating for example access to social networks for the spouse (for example, children through schools, dogs through dog parks). (McNulty 2012, 420.)

The level of intercultural adjustment may depend on how well spouses can balance the capabilities against the demands they face in the international assignment situation. Spouses who have poor coping mechanisms are at risk to fail with the re-formation of their new identity, and it in turn affects their overall intercultural adjustment (McNulty 2012, 421). Spouses with a positive perception of the international assignment require fewer coping mechanisms to adjust to the host country than spouses with a negative attitude towards the relocation (Caligiuri & al. 1998, 609).

2.3.2 Dual-career issues

A spouse's inability to find employment in the host country as well as the loss of their career in their home country have been found to cause problems in spouses' intercultural adjustment (Andreason 2003, 552; McNulty 2012, 420). In some studies, the matter of increasing amount of working couples going on international assignments is brought forth as an important factor (Andreason 2008; Cole 2011, McNulty 2012). Over half of the families going on assignments are dual-career couples (Cole 2011, 1504). Couples might turn down offers to go on assignments in fear of disruption of the spouse's career. If the spouse is not willing to relocate or not capable of adjusting to the new environment, it may affect the expatriate employee's intercultural adjustment and lead to assignment failure. (Andreason 2003, 553.) However, when dual-career couples in unison decide to accept the assignment, they do so with a conscious understanding that one person's career takes precedence for the duration of the assignment (Cole 2011, 1523).

In addition to higher refusal rates of international relocations and disruption of spouse career, other problems associated to dual-career issues are; extended adjustment cycle, drop in the family income level, increased dysfunctional family consequences, and spousal repatriation and re-engagement issues (Cole 2011, 1506). Unresolved dual-career issues negatively influence spouse adjustment (McNulty 2012, 421).

2.3.3 Family systems theory and family relationships

Many researchers use *family systems theory* to study intercultural adjustment (Caligiuri & al. 1998; McNulty 2012; Takeuchi, Yun & Tesluk 2002). It focuses on the dynamics and relationships between family system components. Relationships between family members exist in a state of balance. Each family member correspondingly affects the psychological state of the other. Stressful events, such as relocation to a new country, bring forth internal and external factors, which put pressure on the family balance. The family members will then need to use coping mechanisms to deal with the stress to try to maintain the balance. (McNulty 2012, 419.)

McNulty (2012) suggests that of the factors that influence spouse adjustment, forming and maintaining relationships is one of the biggest and most common tensions spouses experience. Change in the family relationship dynamics, potential abandonment of spouse's career, loss of familiar social support networks and altered financial status cater to marital stress. Strong marriage was cited as the most important coping mechanism in living abroad. (McNulty 2012, 422.) Spouses and expatriates report feelings of loneliness and

disconnect from friends and extended family. High level of family support seems to positively affect intercultural adjustment by reducing cultural stress. It is thus vital for spouses to make enough time for relationships, and especially for marital connections. (Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012, 74.)

2.4 Forms of organizational support

Organizations tend to underestimate firstly, the need for employing special activities to choose, train and support the expatriate employee and their family, and secondly, the influence spousal adjustment can have on the expatriate adjustment (Andreason 2003, 549-550). Considering that international assignment failures can be costly, organizations should take measures to ensure the expatriate and family are supported well enough. The next chapters discuss different support activities organizations can adopt.

2.4.1 Assignment agreement and policies affect the level of help offered

The terms of international assignments are generally outlined in an assignment agreement between the employee and the home and host country companies. The agreement is drafted according to an existing policy, or in case there is no existing policy, individually per assignee. The agreement forms the basis of communication with employees and their families around to what they are entitled. The level of support is reflected in the agreement, which eases administration for the company. Items generally included in the agreement are, for example: remuneration, accommodation, transport, travel, insurance, home leave, holidays and hours of work, transportation & storage costs, schooling for children, and other possible benefits. (Bailey 2012.)

Organizations may have written international assignment policies in place. There are usually different policies for different types of assignments (long-term, short-term, business travel, and so on). The policies outline terms of and process for the assignment, such as steps to be taken for the move, level of organizational support, and remuneration and benefits related items. A written unified policy ensures equal treatment of employees and negates the need to negotiate the full terms of an international assignment with each assignee individually. In case any problems arise throughout the assignment duration due to possible changes in the nature of the assignment, the policy can be referred to in order to solve the issues. (Bailey 2012; Relocate Global 2016a; Relocate Global 2016.)

The assignment policies and agreements usually dictate what level of organizational support the employee and their family members receive while on assignment. Often spouse and family members are not considered in the agreement outside of the costs related to

the logistical side of the move. The next Chapter 2.4.2 outlines the types of support that organizations can provide to expatriates and their families.

2.4.2 Direct and indirect support activities

Organizational support activities can be divided into direct (organization-sponsored) and indirect (organization-encouraged) forms of support (Andreason 2003). In the next chapters the forms of support, which also affect the spouse, are discussed more closely.

Anticipatory adjustments include measures such as using appropriate selection criteria and mechanisms for expatriates. These can include pre-screening of candidates for preferred personal traits and skills, interviews to check family situation and motivation for the assignment as well as impacts on the spouse's career, for example. (Andreason 2003, 549-550.) An important factor to consider that companies tend to overlook is *family situation*. Seen as family reasons are the most often cited reasons for assignment failure, organizations can consider family situations by incorporating the spouse into the interview process. It is important to uncover whether the family dynamics seem to be in order (for example, no impending divorce) and that the spouse is willing to relocate and is not against the assignment (for example, due to career interruption). (Andreason 2003, 550.) Research shows that positive attitude and motivation to go on the assignment facilitates spouse adjustment, and vice versa, negative attitude can cause assignment failure (Cagliuri & al. 1998, 609).

Compensation packages and benefits are a direct form of support. The content of the package varies. The most common items, in addition to salary and bonus, that can be included are; e.g. housing allowance (to cover the cost of rent and utilities), relocation allowance (to cover the cost of moving related purchases), home-leave trips (e.g. paid flights to visit home country yearly), cost-of-living allowance (to cover loss in purchasing power of money due to inflation), and children's private school education (PwC 2017, 61).

Organizations may offer the expatriate and family *pre-departure training*. Many organizations view this training of limited importance and may not offer pre-departure training at all. (Haslberger & Brewster 2008, 332; PwC & Cranfield University 2011, 13). Even if training is offered to the employee, companies might neglect the spouse in this regard. The level and depth of training can vary based on the culture novelty between home and host country, the duration of the assignment, and the expected interaction with host country locals (Andreason 2003, 550). Training should be offered not only pre-departure, but also during and after, as part of repatriation, the assignment to sufficiently alleviate cultural stressors

expatriate families face (Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012, 73). The nature of cross-cultural training is discussed more closely in Chapter 2.4.3.

Language training is a common form of direct organizational support. Host country language fluency will ease communication with locals and thus facilitates intercultural adjustment (Shaffer & Harrison 2001, 252). The longer the assignment, the bigger positive impact language skills in host language have on adjustment (Andreason 2003, 551).

Organizations may provide expatriate and spouse with practical support such as *help with compliance matters*. This means assistance with obtaining work and residence permits, or help with mandatory local registrations, for instance. *Logistical help* for the move is also provided by, for example, helping with finding accommodation, finding schools for children, or offering removal of goods.

Settling-in services, such as pre-visit, orientation to the new living area, and help with setting up a bank account can be helpful to the expatriate and spouse. *Practical help with everyday matters*, such as guidance on where to get groceries and who to contact to fix household things is another form of direct organizational support.

Other forms of direct support which may benefit the spouse are *family mentoring programs* with support from host country locals, *psychological counseling* for spouses feeling stress and anxiety, *professional support* (e.g. career counseling, job search assistance), or *educational support* (e.g. tuition reimbursement). (Andreason 2003, 553; McNulty 2012, 430).

Indirect forms of support are often less time consuming and less costly than direct forms of support. They provide spouses with means of developing skills to cope with the stressors of the intercultural adjustment process (Andreason 2003, 553). Some forms of indirect support are, for example, encouraging the spouse to get involved in different *sports or social clubs*, *community activities*, providing information about local and expatriate *networking groups*, *career opportunities* and *childcare services* (if not directly sponsored). Some indirect forms of support are inexpensive to produce; companies can have lists and databases available, which can then be shared with the spouses when needed. They might require some updating from time to time, but do not require specific support programs or active participation from HR staff or relocation consultants.

Spouses have reported that they would have benefited from having the expatriate participate more in the relocation process. Companies tend to have expatriate employees immersed in work as soon as they arrive, leaving the spouse to tend to the practical matters related to the relocation. Organizations could indirectly support the spouse by giving the employee some *time off during the relocation* and *reducing business-related travel in the first month of the assignment*. (McNulty 2012, 429.)

Pre-departure expectations are shown to drive intercultural adjustment significantly more than actual experience (Caligiuri, Phillips, Lazarova, Tarique & Burgi 2001, 366). One way organizations can indirectly support spouse adjustment is to help the spouse *set their expectations* of the assignment and support activities on a realistic level. If the expectations are higher than the reality, the spouse might perceive receiving inadequate organizational support and this might influence the intercultural adjustment negatively (Cole 2011, 1523).

Direct and indirect forms of organizational support are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Direct and indirect forms of organizational support (Andreason 2003; Cole 2011; McNulty 2012; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012)

Direct	Indirect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensation and benefit packages • Including family in selection process • Training (pre-departure, during and after assignment) • Language training • Help with compliance matters (work & residence permits, local registrations) • Logistical help with the move and finding accommodation • Extended adjustment time provided for employee • Practical help with day-to-day matters • Family mentoring programs • Psychological counseling • Job search assistance/ career counseling • Educational support • Introduction to other expatriates • Childcare services • Providing networking opportunities (e.g. corporate events) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting realistic expectations about the assignment • Encouraging: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - getting involved in clubs, or other support groups - developing hobbies - getting involved in children’s school, religious or community activities - keeping a journal or a blog - planning outings - finding employment in the local environment - communication with family and friends in home country • Encouraging and enabling interaction within the family • Information about expatriate forums and spouse networking groups

McNulty (2012) argues that effective organizational support is multidimensional, and consists of different types of support: practical, social and professional support. Practical support relates to the administrative side of the assignment (e.g. pre-visit before relocation, assistance with work & residence permits, providing training). Professional support relates to professional integration of the spouse (e.g. career coaching, job search assistance, tuition reimbursement). Social support refers to the social integration of the spouse (e.g. networking events, introductions to other expatriates, club memberships). A combination of these types of support being available to the spouse contributes to the intercultural adjustment process much more efficiently than any one type alone. Specifically, professional support and social support were found to have the greatest impact on spouse identity reconstruction. (McNulty 2012, 425-430.)

Some companies manage the support activities for expatriates themselves. Others may choose to utilize external service providers partially or fully, if they have limited resources

to take care of the support activities in-house. The reasons for outsourcing vary from not having enough staff, knowledge, or finances to provide effective support, or just wanting to make sure to have uniform service level for all expatriates and their families (Andreason 2003, 554). Professional consulting and relocation providers generally assist organizations and expatriates with, for example, immigration, international taxation, international payroll, cross-cultural training, international company policies, assignment contracts, and practical matters regarding the move itself. These issues often require special expertise the companies do not possess, and it would take them a considerable time and effort to tackle the issues themselves (Andreason 2003, 554). Relocation consultants generally have a personal contact with the relocating family, and therefore can act as a liaison between the expatriate and the local culture, and help with the initial overwhelming daily hassles and stressors the families face when moving abroad.

There are some shortcomings experienced with organizational support. In some cases, HR personnel of the sending or receiving organization may not have personal relocation experience, and thus are not able to provide meaningful support, as they do not fully understand the family's situation. Additionally, senior management might be afraid of the potential for increased costs additional support services would create. Research shows that it might actually be cost saving to arrange additional support, e.g. professional guidance, to spouses as spousal adjustment facilitates expatriate adjustment and work performance, and thus reduces the risk of assignment failure. (Cole 2011; Interviewee A 18 July 2018; McNulty 2012.)

Effective organizational support is shown to have a positive influence on spouse intercultural adjustment (Kraimer, Wayne & Jaworski 2001). The need for support is individual, and even though organizations may want to make sure that their policies are fair and service level is equal to all employees and their spouses, it is important to note that some spouses need more support than others do (McNulty 2012, 431). Therefore, appropriate level of organizational support should be assessed case by case.

2.4.3 Assignment and intercultural training

As part of the assignment package, companies may offer assignees and spouses assignment training, or intercultural training. Assignment training entails elements, which help the assignee with the adjustment process in general. The content of the training will inevitably vary depending on the service provider, but in general, the training's purpose is to prepare the employee for the challenges in intercultural working environment and in understanding how one's own culture affects interaction with locals. The training can also in-

clude elements related to country-specific factors, such as local culture and habits. (Interviewee A 18 July 2018.) The training may also be offered to the spouse and children, depending on the company.

Research is strongly in favor of cross-cultural training (Black & Gregersen 1991; Haslberger & Brewster 2008, 332; Littrell, Salas, Hess, Paley & Riedel 2006; Waxin & Panaccio 2005, 64). Intercultural training can help to reduce the effect of culture novelty by explaining some existing culture differences and ways locals behave (Waxin & Panaccio 2005, 64). By removing some of the culture novelty aspects, intercultural training will increase the adjustment for both the expatriate and spouse.

Intercultural training is said to have positive effect on adjustment especially in cases where the assignee or spouse have limited prior international experience (Waxin & Panaccio 2005, 63). However, mere living abroad does not necessarily mean a person has improved their intercultural skills. Assignment training can also be helpful to persons who have prior international experience: it can broaden their perspectives, have them analyze their own behavior patterns, and bring new information on the culture they are about to embark in. (Interviewee A 18 July 2018.)

Many assignees and their accompanying family members struggle at first with adjusting to their new life outside of their home country. It is evident, however, that organizations do not invest in pre-departure learning and development such as assignment training, when compared with how much they pay in relation to on-assignment allowances. (PwC & Cranfield University 2011, 22; Waxin & Panaccio 2005, 64.) Assignment training is one way to ease the initial difficulties families face and can also be a good outlet for the families to vent their potential frustrations (Interviewee A 18 July 2018).

2.5 Theoretical framework and model for organizational support

Based on the literature review, I am proposing a theoretical framework for this research in Figure 6, which builds upon prior models of Black, Mendenhall & Oddou (1991) and Shaffer & Harrison (2001). In the following paragraphs, I will present the reasoning behind the content of this framework, and will present a model for determining organizational support activities derived from the framework and data collected for this study.

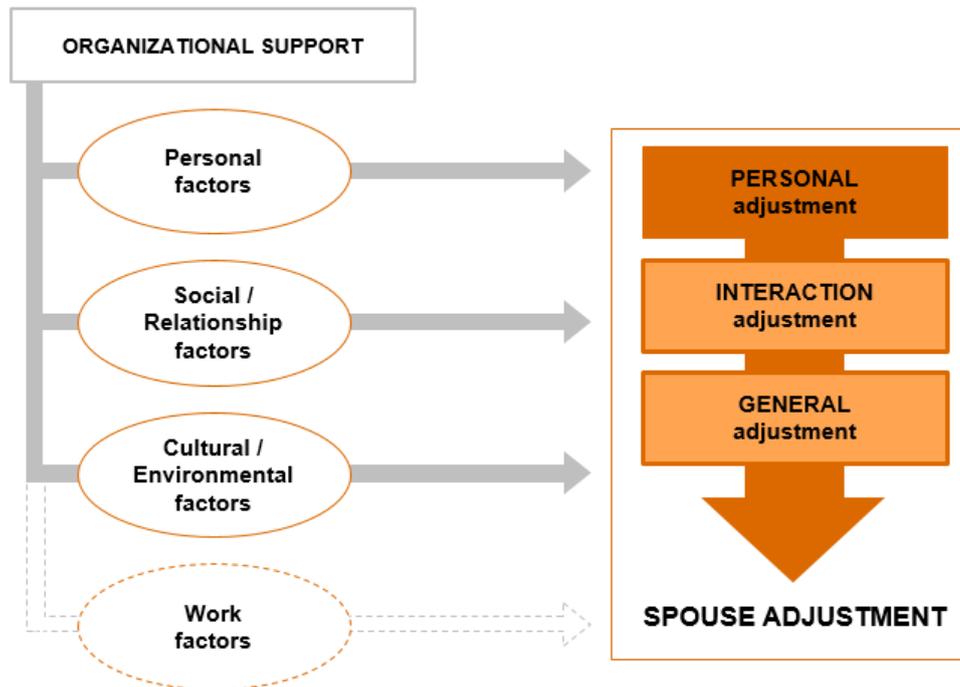


Figure 6. Theoretical framework on spouse adjustment

As mentioned earlier in the literature review, spouse adjustment can be divided into three sections: 1) personal, 2) interaction and 3) general adjustment (Andreason 2008, 382; Black & al. 1991, 303; Shaffer & Harrison 2001, 245). In order to be able to adjust into the new social and cultural environment, the spouse has to be able to have some form of personal adjustment first. Considering the potential spillover effects between the dimensions (Caligiuri & al. 1998; Cole 2011; Takeuchi & al. 2002), personal factors, such as individual traits and social skills have an influence on the interaction and general adjustment, and therefore it is reasonable to assume that personal adjustment aids in the interaction and general adjustment. If the biggest impact on adjustment stems from the spouse's ability to re-establish a social sense of themselves (Shaffer & Harrison 2001), personal abilities play a big role in the adjustment process.

Organizational support can have an impact on multiple factors described in earlier theories, and therefore should be mentioned as its own factor cascading through the other factors contributing either positively or negatively to spousal adjustment. (Andreason 2003.) Considering that the assignment policies and practices of the sending organizations have a significant impact on the spouse, it should be considered that organizational support can influence different factors of spouse adjustment positively (McNulty 2012, 420).

According to a recent KPMG (2018) study, professional support was offered to spouses in some capacity in 66% of the participating organizations. The most common form of support was either work permit assistance or an allowance that must be used for designated

expenses (e.g. education and/or job search). Only 34% offered direct job search assistance. (KPMG 2018, 43-52.) In the wake of the increase in dual-career couples in the expatriate population, work should be considered to some extent in spousal adjustment. If the spouse did have a job in home country, and had to give up their career for the international assignment, it will have some form of impact on their identity reconstruction, and consequently on their adjustment (Andreason 2003; Cole 2011; McNulty 2012; Shaffer & Harrison 2001). Vice versa, if a spouse did not work in home country, and continues to not work in host country, work might not be a big factor in their adjustment. Because work may or may not have influence on the adjustment of Company X spouses, it is left as a potential factor in the framework used in this study.

Since perceived skills (general and social self-efficacy), extended family support and prior jobs had either null or negative effect on the adjustment in the host country, they are not in the focus in this study (Shaffer & Harrison 2001, 252). Shaffer and Harrison (2001) also found that professional identity, social status and time spent with friends were the biggest contributing factors to spouse adjustment. McNulty (2012) suggests that professional support (i.e. assistance in job search) and social support (to alleviate marital stress) has the greatest impact on spouse identity reconstruction.

Considering the framework presented and the forms of organizational support brought forth in the theory part (Chapter 2.4), this study will look at which factors contributing to adjustment could be positively influenced by organizational support provided by Company X. Based on the literature review, the following factors are considered important to look at in this study:

<p>● Personal factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Previous international experience • Language skills • Expectations / motivation 	<p>● Social factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family members' adjustment • Social network • HCN support • Other expatriates' support
<p>● Cultural / Environmental factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living conditions • Culture novelty 	<p>● Work factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change in employment status

The study will also take into account the feasibility of Company X to provide the support activities. The feasibility is assessed based on interviews of Company X's representatives conducted at the beginning of the study development project. Company X introduction and

the discussion on current state of expatriate support in Chapter 1.2 is based on these interviews. Feasibility in this study means the resources the company has to commit (e.g. staff, financial), and also whether it is even possible for the organization to influence the factor with support activities (e.g. when it comes to personal traits of the spouse, or personal relationships inside the family).

The factors influencing spouse adjustment are used in the following model of importance for adjustment vs. feasibility of support activities in the case of Company X (Figure 7). Data points are plotted on two axes. One axis relates to the importance for positive spouse adjustment (as determined through the analysis of the interviews of the spouses), and the other relates to the feasibility for the organization to provide support activities related to these factors in order to facilitate adjustment.

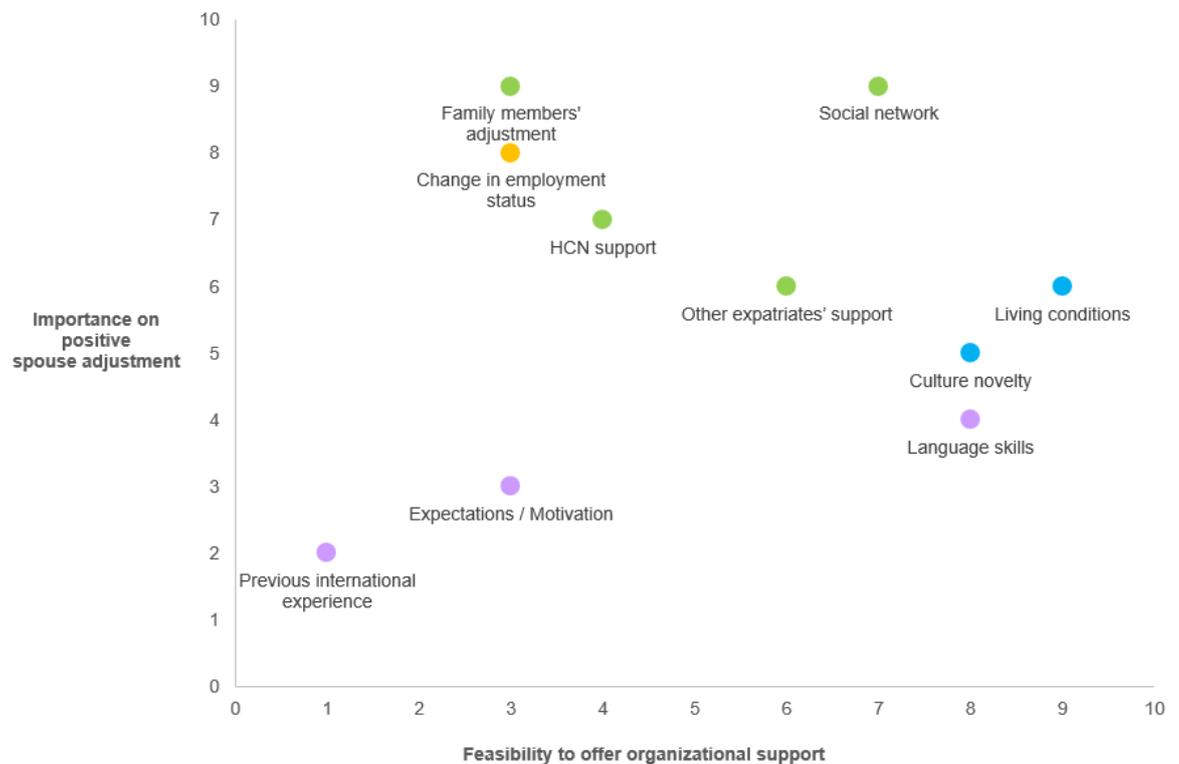


Figure 7. Importance vs. Feasibility: Current expected state for Company X and their expatriates' spouses

3 Methodological choices

This chapter introduces the methodological choices made in the planning phase of the study. It outlines the reasoning why I used a specific strategy and the practical steps of the research actions and analysis process. Lastly, I discuss the implementation of the chosen development initiative.

3.1 Choosing the methods to conduct the study

The main goal of this study was to find out how Company X could better support their expatriates' spouses in their adjustment process. There are big parts of the process of relocation to Finland that are constant and of equal importance to every expatriate and their family members (for instance, immigration related rules, regulations and paperwork, physical moving and traveling, need of accommodation, and so on). These aspects make the process similar to all expatriates and spouses. On top of this, every relocating individual has personal expectations for and experiences of the process. The essentials of the process, those that are common to all, can be identified and the subsequent service delivered rather easily. This means that to find out how Company X could help in the spouse adjustment process, the study focused on the individuals' expectations and experiences to figure out the real improvement areas. It was important to view the spouses as social actors and understand their perspectives. The aim of the study was to uncover participants' opinions, and instead of numbers and facts or law-like generalizations, specifics about the individuals' experiences. This makes the ontology and epistemology of this study subjectivist. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2016, 129.)

Uncovering participants' experiences about a phenomenon calls for a qualitative method to approach the research (Saunders & al. 2016, 168). As this study focused on understanding a phenomenon through meanings of people through a mono-method qualitative research, the research philosophy is interpretivism (Saunders & al. 2016, 164).

This study was conducted with an abductive approach. Data was collected about this specific case with its own unique settings to create a theory that fits Company X's and the spouses' situation, but first I looked at theory to understand the phenomenon in question. (Saunders & al. 2016, 147-148.) The time horizon of the research is cross-sectional, because the author wanted to focus on a snapshot of the situation instead of going too far back in history or future, as the author wanted to establish the current state of things and how it could be improved upon (Saunders & al. 2016, 200).

Because the requirement for the study was to solve a problem that stems from a real-life business case and the purpose was to put the findings into action, a good strategy for the study was action research. Action research aims to solve organizational problems through participation and cooperation, and is said to have implications to the participants and the organization beyond the study. The distinctive features are identifying the issue in question, planning action, taking action and evaluating action. The research is conducted in cycles. (Saunders & al. 2016, 189-191.) The cycles typical to action research are presented in Figure 8 below.

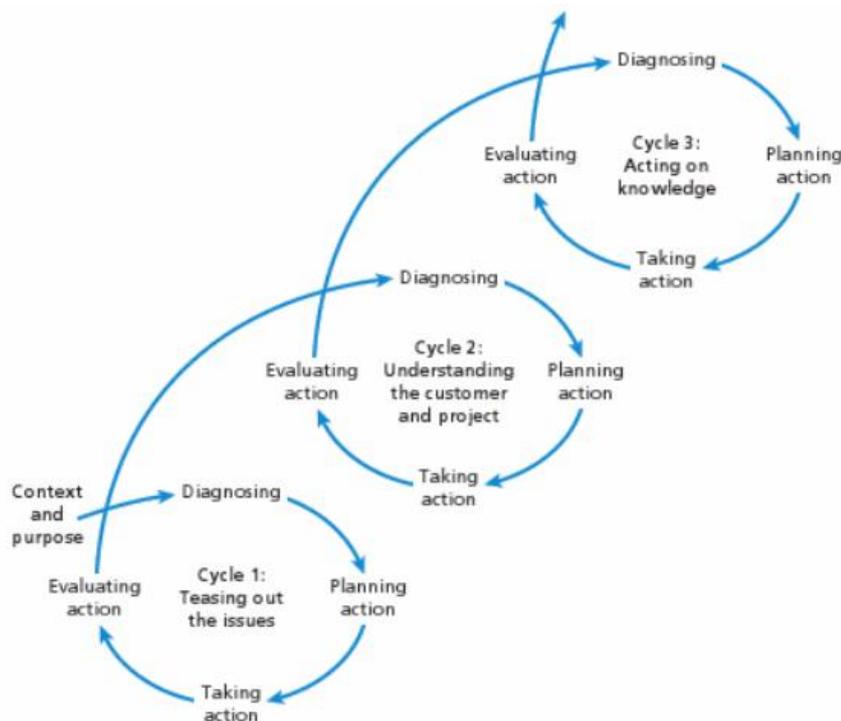


Figure 8. The three cycles of the Action Research spiral (Saunders & al. 2016, 191)

3.2 Description of researching actions

The project timeline can be explored in Chapter 1.1. I began the thesis process by reading literature, studies and published articles related to the research subject. The theory part of this research can be explored in Chapter 2. To establish the current state of things, I suggested a conceptual framework based on earlier theory (Chapter 2.5), and then gathered data to explore the situation and experiences of the spouses of Company X's expatriates. This was done in order to identify common denominators or themes and then to create suggestions for possible support initiatives Company X could incorporate to facilitate spouse adjustment. Company X could potentially later utilize the support activity recommendations to further develop the same service for their external clients.

To begin the data collection, I needed information on the internal process of how Company X handles the process related to expatriates' relocation. Therefore, I interviewed two

Company X representatives, an HR Coordinator and an assignment training coach. The Company X introduction in Chapter 1.2 is formed on the basis of the two interviews.

I wanted to find out how the process works, what support is offered to spouses and what the difficulties from HR's point of view were. I interviewed the internal HR Global Mobility team representative of Company X, who is responsible for the service in Finland. The interview was conducted face-to-face, and was semi-structured. I had specific questions that I needed an answer to, but also wanted to leave room for free discussion to see if any surprising findings would surface.

I conducted another face-to-face interview with Company X's assignment training coach who has vast experience with training both employees and spouses in adjustment on an assignment to a foreign country. The assignment training coach interviewed holds a Master's Degree in Intercultural Communication. The coach has lived abroad (Hungary, Mexico, Ecuador, Chile, Ireland), in several different roles (student, employee, accompanying spouse), and has worked in the field of global mobility since 2004. The coach has long working experience of training expatriates for international long- and short-term assignments, foreign professionals coming to work in Finland and repatriates returning from international assignment. In addition, the coach has trained managers and teams in diversity and intercultural competence. (Interviewee A 18 July 2018.) The reason for interviewing the coach was to gain an understanding of what the spouses go through in their adjustment process, and to understand the possible pitfalls. This interview was semi-structured with a few key questions, but consisted in large part of free discussion around themes that arose.

It was important to collect experiences and viewpoints of the spouses of Company X's expatriates who have relocated to Finland in order to find out the various aspects related to the adjustment process. For this purpose, I conducted four semi-structured theme interviews of the spouses of Company X's expatriates. Three of the spouses had already returned to their home countries, and one was living in Finland at the time of the interview.

I chose a semi-structured theme interview as the data gathering method. The theme interview method is generally used to explore individuals' subjective experiences of a certain occurrence, as is the case for this research. In a semi-structured theme interview, there are no pre-set questions apart from maybe a few key questions, but themes are set beforehand. This allows freedom for the interviewer and interviewee to discuss the themes in no particular order. The interviewer should guide the interview to make sure that all necessary areas are covered. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2000, 47-48; Saunders & al. 2016, 391.)

Based on my own experience through working with expatriate spouses, I had an idea of what matters spouses face when relocating to a new country. I had thought about initial themes to include in the interviews. To avoid my own possible biases from affecting the interviews too much, I first wanted to investigate existing theory before finalizing the themes. After reviewing literature and interviewing the assignment training coach of Company X, the themes became clearer. I asked the interviewees questions around the following themes: 1) Prior experience, expectations, living conditions, and cultural matters, 2) Factors that affected adjustment to Finland, 3) Social networks, and 4) Support.

The reason for choosing a semi-structured theme interview was that I wanted to leave room for the spouses to describe their own experiences freely without guiding them too much with pre-set question format. I also wanted to allow possible new concepts to arise.

One interview was conducted first to test the themes and duration of the interview. The frame of the theme interview seemed to work well, but I noted that the interview lasted a bit longer than initially anticipated. This was taken into account when communicating to the rest of the interviewees about the duration. The interviews were recorded with a permission from the interviewees, and transcribed in word-processing format. I was hoping to conduct face-to-face interviews, but due to the geographical challenges and scheduling difficulties, all interviews ended up being over the phone: two interviews were video calls, and two were voice calls. The duration of the interviews varied between 45-60 minutes.

3.3 Method of analysis

After the spouse interviews were completed, it was necessary to convert the large amount of audio-recorded conversation into meaningful outcomes through an analysis. This needed to be done carefully because my potential biases and own subjectivity could accidentally corrupt the results despite being cautious of not letting them. To avoid this tainting of results, I utilized Thematic Analysis method. The main purpose of Thematic Analysis is to search for themes that occur across a set of data, in this case interviews (Saunders & al. 2016, 579). The method is described below in short.

Thematic analysis

Step 1: Become familiar with data

Step 2: Code data

Step 3: Search for themes and patterns to recognize relationships between themes

Step 4: Refine themes

(Saunders & al. 2016, 579-586.)

To become familiar with the data, after each interview I listened to the audio recording again right away, and analyzed the data initially to see if new themes arose in addition to the preconceived themes. I made a transcript summary of the points I thought were key to the research to make the combining of the full data less cumbersome later on. A transcript summary is used to rephrase the key message of what is said into shorter statements. It also allows adding comments about the interviewee and their intonation and other visual or verbal cues. (Saunders & al. 2016, 571-576.)

To analyze the full collected data, it was first organized in an electronic database. The time and date of collection was recorded, and data was categorized according to both anticipated and emerging themes. (Baxter & Jack 2008.) I utilized color and letter coding to recognize the themes: color for easing the combining of data into themes and letters to remember to which theme and interviewee the data referred.

Combining the data sources was crucial to the analysis in order to look for patterns in the data to recognize relationships between the emerging themes. (Baxter & Jack 2008.) Once the patterns and emerging themes were recognized, I adjusted the original themes according to the findings if needed.

In practice, the steps described above are not linear, but instead they are often simultaneous and repetitious. It means that I would recursively analyze the data; as I conducted new interviews, I would go back to the earlier data collected and analyzed to refine the themes and categorizing of the data as new information presented itself. (Saunders & al. 2016, 580.) I used abductive approach, where I began the analysis with theoretically derived themes, which I then modified as I studied my collected data (Saunders & al. 2016, 579).

3.4 Implementation of the initiative project

After analyzing the interview data, I drafted recommendations for Company X on how they could improve the support services to spouses. I then had a meeting with the commissioning party and the HR representative to go through the initial results. Based on the recommended initiatives drafted until that time, we chose to implement an informal event to promote social networking. The event allowed discussion with spouses currently in Finland on the recommendations made thus far that were important to the study topic.

The Company X HR representative sent an invitation via email to all spouses of Company X expatriates currently in Finland to participate in the event. The purpose of the event was to provide a networking opportunity to spouses, and to go through the results of this study

and recommendations drafted to Company X at that time. It was mentioned in the invitation that we would like to collect the spouses' opinions on the recommendations given to Company X. Invitees were given a link to sign up to the event. They were offered the option to bring children along in case lack of a babysitter would otherwise prevent their participation.

The event was purposefully informal and time was reserved for networking at the beginning. We started out by introducing ourselves, and continued with small talk and refreshments. Once everyone was relaxed and had had a chance to chat with everyone, we moved on to the more structured presentation of the research topic. I presented the research topic, the theoretical framework and the findings to the participants.

After the networking event, we gathered around a table and had the interview. I chose to use a group interview as the method to uncover event participants' opinions on initial drafts of the recommended support activities. This was a natural choice since the interview participants were the individuals who joined the networking event preceding the interview. The participants were different individuals than the interviewees in the initial data collection round in July-August 2018. The discussion in the group interview focused on the analysis findings from the first data collection as well as the drafted recommendations. The interview was recorded with participants' approval.

I first used data sampling to transcribe the matters brought up in the group interview audio recording that I thought were key to the themes derived from the first data collection round (Saunders & al. 2016, 573). I then used the Thematic Analysis method for the group interview analysis to complement, or potentially contradict, the existing findings. The results of the analysis are presented in Chapter 4.

I then had a meeting with Company X representatives to go through the feedback and results of the event. Full results of the analysis can be seen in Chapter 4. Overall, the feedback on the event was positive. The participants welcomed networking opportunities. Especially events where other expatriates would be in participation and events that would support potential employment were seen as beneficial. Suggestions were also made about Company X including expatriate spouses in some internal extracurricular events (such as family picnic day). Providing networking options was seen as one possible way adjustment could be made easier. In addition to Company X organizing networking events, providing a list of available external social clubs, networking forums and so on would be helpful to spouses, especially if the options were presented with the spouse's background and interests in mind: *"-- if we have that [pre-selected options] available, it*

makes it kind of easier to pick from what's available out there rather than to go look at everything and try to find specific [options]”.

After analyzing the group interview results, I was able to combine them with the data already analyzed and then finalized the list of recommended initiatives given to Company X to improve the support services provided to spouses. The recommended initiatives are presented in Chapter 5. In addition, I made a list of the next steps I think Company X should take to start putting these initiatives in action. The next steps are presented in Chapter 6.1.

The timeline for the implementation of the first recommended initiative is pictured in Figure 9 below.

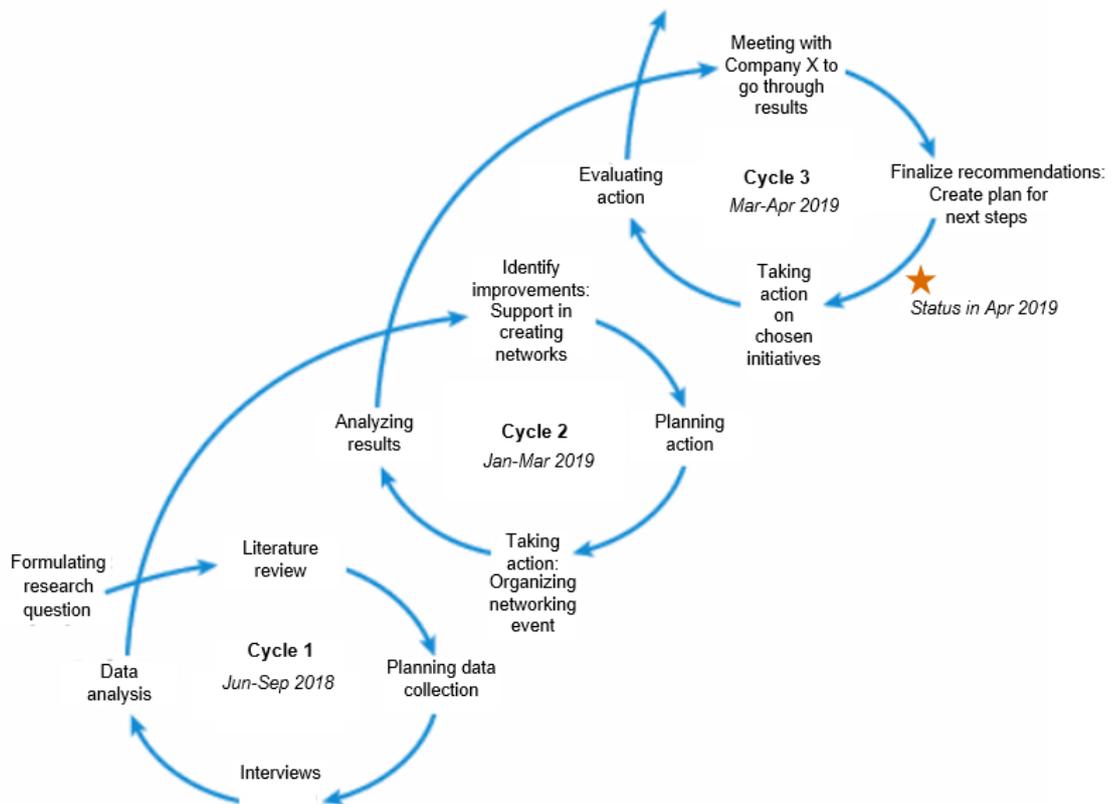


Figure 9. Timeline of the implementation cycles

4 Spouse interviews

This chapter presents the results from the analysis of data collected from Company X expatriates' spouses. After presenting the analysis, I will discuss the reliability and validity of the qualitative analysis conducted. At the end, I will summarize the main findings.

4.1 Interviewees

All individual interviewees relocated from the United States. One interviewee was of French nationality, three were Americans. Three participants were female, and one was male. The interviewees had been in Finland for an average period of 31.5 months. Three participants had returned to their home country in 2017 or 2018, and one participant was still in Finland. The list of individual interview participants is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. List of semi-structured individual theme interview participants

Interviewee	Date interviewed	Time spent in Finland (months)	Working on assignment	Children
1	8 August 2018	48	Yes	Yes
2	3 August 2018	14	Yes	No
3	26 July 2018	34	Yes	Yes
4	24 July 2018	30	No	Yes

The group interview participants had relocated to Finland in 2018 and 2019. They were of German, American, South African and Filipino nationalities, and had relocated from these countries. Three participants were female, and one was male. The list of group interview participants is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. List of group interview participants

Interviewee	Date interviewed	Time spent in Finland (months)	Working on assignment	Children
1	7 March 2019	5	No	Yes
2	7 March 2019	2	No	No
3	7 March 2019	2	No	No
4	7 March 2019	8	Yes	No

The following analysis is based on the interviews conducted in July and August 2018. The analysis is complemented by the results of the group interview conducted in March 2019. The results of the group interview are presented briefly in its own chapter (Chapter 4.2)

next. However, in order to present a unified analysis, I have combined all interview findings in the chapters that follow (starting at Chapter 4.3).

4.2 Outcomes of the group interview

The discussion in the group interview at the end of the event focused on the findings from the analysis of the initial interviews conducted in July and August 2018. In addition to discussing the findings to see if the experiences of the spouses were similar to the individually interviewed spouses, I focused on presenting the draft recommendations to get the spouses opinions on how well they would address the issues spouses face in their adjustment. I have appended the slides presented at the networking event to this report (Appendix 5).

The biggest differences and contradictions that participants brought up regarding the findings were related to the work factors as well as local language skills. In addition, comments that the participants made about the draft recommendations on local language skills, professional support and social support contributed to the final form of these recommendations. The outcomes of the group interviews form a part of the analysis in the next chapters.

4.3 Personal factors

Language skills

None of the interviewees reported having big issues with limited host country language skills. Some minor issues were experienced in, for example, finding food at the grocery store, or communicating with someone in a rural area. Translation help was needed from host country nationals on occasion with, for example, official paperwork from government officials in local language. One spouse referred to a time when they needed to have a Company X representative act as a translator over the phone with a local plumber with limited English skills. All interviewees said that the level of English language skills are high on average in Finland, and that there was no need to know Finnish: *“I mean, they may not have wanted to speak English with me but everybody always did. I didn't really have any problems with communicating with people.”* In the group interview, a remark was made on how hard it would be to acquire the skills in the local language. In comparison to the short amount of time spent on the assignment, the expatriate and spouse in question felt it was not worth investing a lot of time in, and had prioritized other matters.

One interviewee's children went to a local daycare to obtain Finnish language skills, and were able to take part in hobbies taught in Finnish later on – something other expatriates'

kids were not able to do without difficulty according to the interviewee. The same interviewee's family stayed in Finland the longest compared to others interviewed.

In the group interview, the three participants who had engaged in finding employment in Finland were of the opinion that acquiring local language skills was of great significance. It seemed to be a requirement in most open positions. In addition, even though one does get by with English, having even a basic level knowledge would be beneficial in everyday situations, for example in grocery stores as labels and instructions can be in only Finnish and maybe in Swedish, or in public transportation where announcements are generally only in the local language.

It could be construed that lack of host country language skills is not an issue in Finland on short-term, but language skills definitely aid in long-term adjustment and provide more opportunities to immerse in the local culture. Host country language skills contribute positively to intercultural adjustment.

Previous international experience and motivation

Out of the four individual interviewees, only one had prior international experience. The spouse with international experience indicated that they knew going in what to expect from the initial adjusting, and therefore had the mindset that they need to be flexible and adapt to the host culture. This adopted attitude and being familiar with the process helped with the adjustment to the new culture:

-- we have learnt how the Finnish people are and it's less tricky. We just have to adapt ourselves -- to them, because that's the goal, you know. When you're going to live in a new country, you don't expect that everything's going to be the same. You adapt yourself to others... and that I think is key.

The other three individual interviewees that did not have prior experience did not report having major difficulties in their adjustment to the Finnish culture. The common theme seemed to be that the cultural differences between their home and host country (USA and Finland) were not so drastic that severe problems never arose. The impact of culture novelty could explain this. One can determine that the greater the culture novelty, the more significance previous intercultural experience has on the adjustment process.

It seems that not having international experience does not have too many negative impacts on the adjustment process of the spouses if culture novelty is low, but does have a positive impact on the adjustment overall.

When talking about the reasons for accepting the assignment, all interviewees said they had discussed the matter with the expatriate employee beforehand and had specifically sought out the experience. Everyone expressed that their partner's career advancement was a big motivator. Spouses with children had also wanted to expose their kids to international experience and a different lifestyle. All interviewees seemed to have a positive attitude towards the assignment. The participants who did not have previous international experience did not report having any particular expectations of the assignment; they had taken the position that it would be an adventure and they would be open-minded. In addition, all reported that after accepting the assignment, the process progressed so fast that they did not have a lot of time to do much else besides work on the practicalities related to the move.

A positive attitude and not having high expectations prior to moving seemed to contribute positively towards the participants' adjustment.

Assignment training

Out of the four individual interviewees, two had received intercultural training organized by Company X. Both interviewees reported the training as a positive experience, which helped them with the adjustment to the new culture.

The relationship between not having pre-assignment training and having difficulties adjusting was not apparent in the interviews. This might partially be because of the minor culture novelty between Finland and the US. However, considering that all interviewees did report having experienced some frustration in their adjustment because of cultural differences, it could be constituted that assignment training is one way of preparing the spouses for the potential challenges caused by the cultural differences.

One interviewee, who did not receive assignment training, was offered it in the host country a bit later after moving. This interviewee had a previous international relocation experience, and they felt they did not need the training at that point. They also referenced the timing being inconvenient, as both the employee and spouse were very busy at the time.

None of the group interviewees had been offered assignment training. One spouse had received something similar through their children's school. "*I don't feel like we missed out on that [assignment training], but I can imagine if you don't have that available right away – it would be tough not to have and in-depth day*". Spouses seemed to agree it would be

important to have this option available, even from the point of view of setting the expectations on the right level. *“It would help like to give insight to the spouses on how things are – done in Finland.”*

Previous experience does not always mean the person has acquired the necessary personal skills to make adjustment in the new culture easier. There is also the notion of cultural differences affecting the behavior of locals and the expatriates. What may work in the previous host country or home country might not hold true in the new host country. This is one reason the need for assignment training should be assessed per individual each time. If such an assessment is not available, organizations might be better off offering assignment training to all assignees and spouses regardless of prior experience.

Based on the interviews, it can be ascertained that assignment training does not negatively influence adjustment, and can be of help with the initial adjustment. It is especially important when culture novelty is high.

Identity reconstruction

One interviewee said that the relocation was not ideal for their career, and mentioned the impact on their career several times. The role of spouse seemed to have caused slight feelings of frustration, even though they did not explicitly say so. Another interviewee did express feeling frustration about not being able to access their own funds at the bank due to the bank's policies and practices. The spouse explained experiencing feeling of lost financial independence due to the banking issues: *“Joint-account is like a weird thing there -- we're here together as a family but only one of us is making any significant amount of money -- I felt trapped -- I had so little access to my money”*. However, overall the interviewees seemed to have accepted the role of accompanying spouse.

It seemed that the individual interviewees' identity in Finland was not so drastically different to how they experienced it back home that they did not experience stress about it. The situation could have been alleviated by the fact that three participants continued working in Finland to some extent. One was home with children, the same as they were in their home country. However, according to the group interview participants, going from full-time work to being at home was a big adjustment, which caused feelings of frustration. Individuals tend to identify with what they do for a living, and a sudden interruption in career can bring forth feelings of confusion about their identity.

One spouse commented on the differences in the corporate culture between Finland and the US. In the US spouses would be more incorporated in activities (for example Christmas parties and other extracurricular activities). This can cause the spouses to feel like they are excluded. In addition, if the spouse perceives that the organization does not support them and that the organization does not understand the spouse is also part of the equation, these two issues together can result in feelings of not being valued by the company. *“Treat the two persons coming the same -- and not like one person is coming and the other is a follower. -- treat them like a family --.”*

All three of the female individual interviewees were home on maternity leave at some point during their assignment. Two interviewees were expecting a child at the time of moving to Finland. This may have contributed to the acceptance of the new role of spouse they were adopting: *“I wasn’t going to work, so I was looking forward to staying at home for a little bit.”* Considering that maternity leave is not necessarily available in the US or is generally much shorter than in Finland, the interviewees expressed having enjoyed the long maternity leave the international assignment made possible.

Some interviewees had created new roles for themselves and kept busy by taking up extracurricular activities; for example, volunteer work, parent-teacher group at a school, international play group at a daycare, and hobbies.

Feeling lonely at some point of the assignment seemed to be familiar to most of the individually interviewed spouses. One interviewee expressed having difficulties with how their social-life changed from being surrounded by friends and family to being around hard-to-approach Finns. One group interview participant commented on how having a social circle of their own would ease spouse adjustment: *“-- that way you’re not waiting all day for husband or wife to come home”*.

4.4 Social factors

Social network

The interviewees often cited not having social connections as a matter causing stress in the early stages of assignment. It took time to develop closer relationships with locals or even non-host country nationals. Feeling lonely at some point of the assignment seemed to be familiar to most of the spouses. One interviewee expressed having difficulties with how their social-life changed from being surrounded by friends and family to being around hard-to-approach Finns, and other interviewees shared this opinion about interacting with locals at the beginning of the assignment. Another remarked how they felt alone around summer holidays and Christmas time when many locals would vacate the city.

Being active and participating in community activities helped one spouse. Spouses with children had managed to meet acquaintances and make friends through children's schools, through so-called socio-cultural brokerage. Other venues of meeting people that were mentioned were, e.g. through friends, gym, dog park, and hobbies. Some had connected with locals, but majority of the connections were made with other expatriates. *"The majority of the people I met and became close with were foreign -- I think that was mainly just because of the circles I was travelling in that the others I met were expats."*

One spouse out of the individual interviewees and one spouse out of the group interviewees reported having a Finnish family living in Finland in their social network already prior to moving to Finland. This connection had helped them to understand the cultural aspects, and also provided insight into local habits and customs; *"They were able to provide us [information] -- oh, this is going on and you should take your kids to this, or it's a celebration of these, you should go look at these"*. Having a local contact can be very valuable to adjustment in order to culturally understand what is going on in your community and surroundings and why.

Social support

Social support, whether it comes from an organization, host country nationals or non-host country nationals plays a significant role in the adjustment of the spouse. In response to where the interviewees look for information or help in problematic situations, they indicated almost exclusively asking someone they knew instead of resorting to the internet or any material provided by Company X, for example. This means that any material resource provided would need to be so extensive that the spouse knew for sure the answer would be found there. Information package provided by Company X were reported to be helpful prior to arriving in the host country as it gave a general understanding of the host country, but few had resorted to it after arrival. Personal contact was preferred.

All individual interviewees reported that they would most often refer to other expatriates for help if they had any questions. The home country HR department of Company X provided contact information of expatriates and spouses who were already in Finland, or had been in Finland previously. Peer support from someone who has been in a similar situation and may have encountered same problems is valued. The threshold for the expatriate spouses to contact a peer also seemed to be experienced lower than contacting host country HR department, especially since they might not have been in personal contact with the HR representative themselves.

Communications with Company X's host country HR department would go through the expatriate employee generally. One spouse reported feeling disconnected from the organization and the relocation process since all communication usually went through the expatriate employee. This was also emphasized when the spouse would have needed help that did not have anything to do with the expatriate. "*Things related to spouse get pushed to handle themselves*". Interviewees did report getting help from the local HR early on in the process, but not for everything they would have liked or needed. "*-- after that [the initial relocation assistance] it was like who do I call if I have a silly question*".

It was brought up in the group interview that spouses felt the level of service was not equal to all. Their experience was that the expatriates' internal grade or the position in the organizational hierarchy would affect the level of service they received. Similarly, if some individuals were more vocal about issues, they would receive more assistance. This would suggest that Company X could benefit from setting the expectations of what service the spouses can expect to receive on the right level at the very beginning of the assignment. Naturally, not every person needs assistance in the same matters, but to know help is available when needed could already go a long way in feeling equal to others and valued by the company.

The need for support would often stretch beyond the initial stages of the administrative process of relocation. Interviewees expressed the need to have continuous support throughout the assignment, mostly with some practical matters. Interviewees mentioned that they did not know whom they could have contacted at Company X. It was mentioned by three interviewees that the need for support would often be ad-hoc questions, e.g. matters related to vehicle inspection registration, or translating a paper from Kela to know what it was about. Therefore, it would have been nice to have a phone number or some sort of quick contact available. Group interview participants were of the opinion that the support does not need to be anything complicated, but an email address would suffice: "*-- it's kind of like permission -- here, you can contact this person. Please use this resource if you need it.*"

Three interviewees mentioned that their partners worked long hours and traveled a lot. This would sometimes make them feel lonely, and was "*a stress on the family*". At the same time, majority of the interviewees reported being able to take family vacations, which helped alleviate the homesickness and acted as a form of strengthening marital bond and family dynamics. One interviewee mentioned they had learned from other expatriates that there might be some instances where they would feel homesick, and the family had specifically lined up vacations periodically to alleviate that:

“After maybe like four or five months it was kind of like a low that you hit -- wow, now we’re here... this is not really just like vacation anymore -- you know, we’re away from our families -- we’re kind of stuck here -- We had heard from a couple people it might happen and had planned a vacation around that time in advance.”

Two other families had also resorted to family vacations to handle stress related to the relocation, and to make the most of the assignment and living abroad. Skype, FaceTime, social media and other tech forms of connecting with family back home as well as visits from extended family in host country were also mentioned to have helped with the social stressors.

4.5 General / Cultural factors

Culture novelty and living conditions

All interviewees seemed to have the opinion that the capital area of Finland was a nice place to live. The words and phrases used to describe it were the following: safe, accommodating to children, well-functioning public transportation, accessibility (no need for a car necessarily), walkable, close to nature, lots of parks, good education system, and clean.

Everyone commented on the weather being a factor causing some bumps in the adjustment: long dark winters and short summers, all interviewees mentioned greyness and coldness. *“The weather was a little bit rough for me -- the summers that we were there were not nice at all -- I can take the winter if there’s a summer -- it was rainy and cold -- it was never hot”*. Another interviewee commented on not wanting to go to Finland initially because of the weather, and because it was remote from the rest of the mainland Europe. It would have been easier to travel around from a continental European country.

One spouse commented on local customs during holidays like Christmas and summers – everyone would vacate the city, and expats would remain: *“It was weird -- everyone’s gone -- you feel very alone”*. Having a host country national contact to explain the local customs, and to for example *“invite us to their summer cottage”* and to other local functions can be very beneficial to adjust to the culture and to eventually feel more at home in the new environment. One participant in the group interview mentioned the positive influence a local contact of theirs has had on adjustment as well.

Culture novelty between Finland and the USA is not so radical (Hofstede Insights 2019). All interviewees claimed they did not have too many issues with cultural differences. However, all reported the same experience of Finns seeming rude, quiet and being hard to approach at first.

You know like little things -- like people wouldn't like hold doors or something like that and in the US it's very very common and I would be like all people are being so rude to me. I realized that no, they're not being rude it's just something that they don't do. Or like no small talk or anything like that.

This slightly more introverted behavior in comparison to the US brought difficulties making new friends initially. However, most reported forming friendships with some locals eventually. It is noteworthy that in a slightly closed and slow-to-warm-up culture such as Finland, it is all the more important that the expatriate is the active party in making an effort to meet people in order to form relationships with locals. One spouse's experience was that once Finns warm up, they are generally nice and open. *"Once I got to know people [at child's daycare], it was hard to get out of the daycare at the end of the day without chatting up with people."* It might be worthwhile to put oneself out there and be active, since Finns do not necessarily take the initiative. Getting involved in activities and learning about the locals and their culture will aid in adjustment. Of course, it is just as acceptable to remain in the expatriate bubble, as long as it serves the spouse's needs.

Two participants commented on the differences in healthcare compared to their home country. They were both pregnant, and had to deal with healthcare related matters in Finland. This, for different reasons, was a big stressor for the spouses. The other spouse felt it would have been beneficial to receive information from Company X in the matter – not knowing how the system works resulted in them utilizing private healthcare instead of the public.

-- even the healthcare kind of stuff -- I kind of still had to fend for myself on that -- or ask people... like expats who had been there before, you know, 'Who did you use when you had a baby?' -- 'What midwife did you use?' I think I tended to go towards the private healthcare... whereas I think we could have utilized the public more. But I just didn't know... like to utilize it.

The daily hassles that create stress often relate to practicalities of things working differently in the host country than what the spouses are used to in their home country. Another example was given about the post office and having to go there to pick up packages instead of having them delivered to one's front door. Having someone explain how things

work is very important, and can have a big impact on how well the spouse adjusts to life in Finland.

It is important for Company X to understand that expatriates and spouses come from a different culture, and pointing to the right direction might not be sufficient at times. In general, giving the correct contact information is not enough, but ensuring that the expatriate and spouse gain understanding by giving a brief description of how things work in Finland is necessary. This could be done by referring to the information package provided to expatriates and spouses prior to arriving Finland, and then providing continuous support when needed after arrival and throughout the assignment. In addition, making sure the people providing the service and the supervisors of the expatriate employee really understand the situation expatriates and their spouses experience is key.

4.6 Work factors

Dual-career couples / Professional support

Three of the four individual interviewees were working part-time or full-time during the assignment. The fourth participant was at home with children by choice, same as in home country. The interviewees did not report needing professional support from Company X. The work was done to their home country employers, or as an entrepreneur. All three female participants had also been on maternity leave while in Finland. None of the working spouses reported difficulties in returning to full-time work after repatriation.

One individual interviewee expressed their career being negatively impacted by the move. However, they explained having made the decision to relocate knowing that would be the case, and that they accepted it. The decision was made together with the expatriate employee, whose career would be positively affected by the assignment.

In the group interview, spouses were interested in working while in Finland, and only one had become employed by the time of the interview. They expressed experiencing difficulties with finding a job, and would have liked some kind of guidance on how to go about finding work. One spouse's partner was in Finland on a local contract, and the other three were on one to two year assignments.

The significance of job search related assistance might be greater for spouses, whose partner is in Finland on a local contract, and thus the length of the stay is not defined necessarily and is most likely a bit longer than just one or two years. If the assignment is extended beyond the original scope, the spouse could remain unemployed for years, which potentially would negatively influence their future career ambitions.

The spouses in the group interview were of the opinion that change in employment status is the most significant factor influencing their adjustment. Assistance in solving that would aid in solving the other factors affecting the adjustment. It would allow them to naturally form social relationships and provide clarity to their identity: “*That would solve a lot of the other problems*”, and “[*would provide*] *directly social contact if you were working*”.

4.7 Reliability and validity

Validity refers to the relevance of the methods used, correctness of the analysis of the results and generalizability of the findings (Saunders & al. 2016, 202). Specifically, with using semi-structured interviews, validity refers to the extent to which the researcher has gained access to an interviewee’s experience, and is able to gather meanings and intentions of the participant from the language used by that individual. The scope to explore meanings during a semi-structured interview may help to enhance the validity of the data collected, although forms of bias and cultural differences may weaken this outcome. (Saunders & al. 2016, 398.)

Reliability relates to consistency of the results. In other words, whether the data collection and analysis would produce consistent findings if alternative researchers on a different occasion were to conduct the same research. (Saunders & al. 2016, 202.) However, in qualitative research, and specifically when using semi-structured interviews, the results are not necessarily intended to be repeatable because they mirror reality at the time the data were collected, and are situations which may be subject to change under different circumstances. Instead, this study attempted to ensure reliability by providing a detailed explanation of the research design, the reasons for choosing the research strategy and methods, and how the data were acquired and analyzed to show that the findings are dependable. (Saunders & al. 2016, 398-399.)

Interviewer bias, i.e. imposing one’s own beliefs and frame of reference, may have an impact on the way the interviewer poses the questions, the way interviewees respond to the questions (comments, tone, or non-verbal cues from the interviewer), and the way the interviewer interprets the answers (Saunders & al. 2016, 396-397). In this research, I tried to prevent interviewer bias by using semi-structured interviews to allow matters outside of the pre-set themes to arise. In addition, I used paraphrasing, repetition and follow up questions as a means to make sure I understood what the interviewee meant. I also used direct quotes from the respondents in the report to support the response interpretations.

Four expatriate spouses of Company X's expatriates were individually interviewed for the purpose of this study. An additional four spouses participated in the group interview conducted in connection with the first initiative implementation. The sample size is small and can be viewed as a limitation to the findings.

We also need to bear in mind that all individual interview participants relocated from the United States to Finland. The cultural aspects affect adjustment, and thus the experiences could be very different for expatriate spouses who have relocated to a country with a greater degree of culture novelty compared to their home country. At the time of conducting the initial data collection for this research, the majority of the Company X expatriates who relocated to Finland with family came from the United States. Therefore, with the USA being the home country to most of the individual interviewees, the culture novelty aspect is limited to differences between the USA and Finland. However, at the time of conducting the group interview, the participants were of multiple nationalities, but this did not reflect on the original culture novelty aspect as the interview focused mostly on complementing analysis findings, and opinions on the drafted recommendations to Company X. If all of the interviews were conducted a year later, the results on the cultural factors could prove different because the expatriate population of Company X is becoming more diverse. Therefore, there are limitations to the cultural factors of this study.

Since only two of the participants were male and the majority were female, the gender factors, which may have affected some aspects of the results, were not focused on in order to keep the individual respondents not so easily recognizable.

4.8 Main findings

After analyzing the semi-structured theme interview and group interview results, I re-visited the model chart made at the beginning of the project. Based on the study results, I decided to move some factors' position on the axes. The final visualization is shown in Figure 10 below, as well as for comparison the initial placements of the factors on the model in Figure 11.

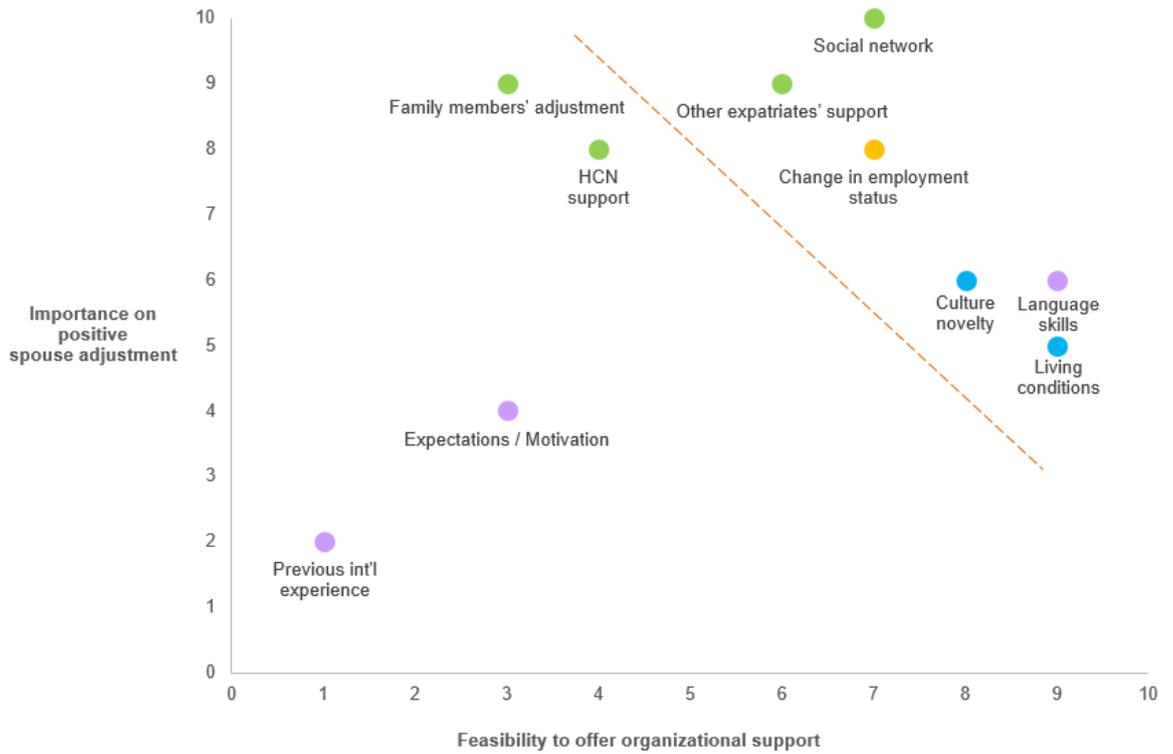


Figure 10. Importance vs. feasibility model: After interviews

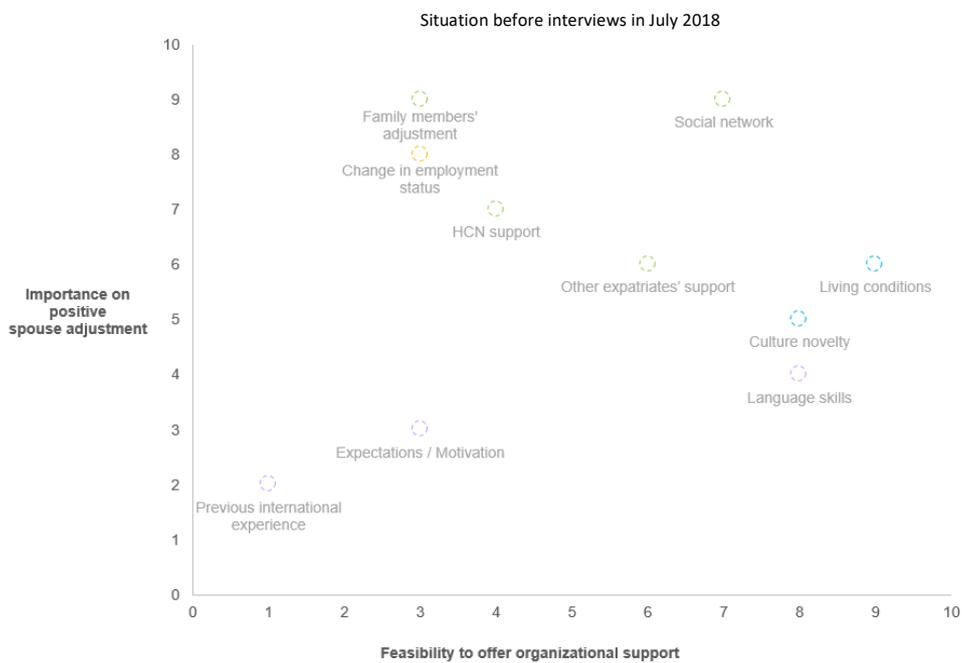


Figure 11. Comparison to the first version of the model pre-interviews

The literature review complemented with the spouse interviews showed that the area, which contributed to adjustment the most, is the social factors. It also seemed based on

this study that it was where spouses could use organizational support the most, in addition to practical matters related to the move and everyday life.

Work factors did not have a significant impact on adjustment to those whose role was not drastically different to that of their home country role and who spent only a couple of years in Finland, e.g. if the spouse continued to work remotely or was not working at all in home or host country. However, work factors had significance to dual-career couples where the spouse's career experienced interruption due to going on the assignment. The type of assistance spouses described beneficial to them would be feasible for Company X to provide, and therefore the position on the model chart changed significantly.

In most cases, Finnish language skills were not that critical to adjustment, since expatriates get along with English exceedingly well in the capital region. However, those who were seeking employment were of the opinion that language skills have a significant importance to adjustment because most available positions required having fluent skills in the local language. In addition, basic skills would reduce the stress brought on by daily hassles since the society functions mainly with Finnish and Swedish, even though people might speak English. As an example, when traveling on a long-distance train, the announcements by the conductor are usually only in Finnish.

Culture novelty and living conditions also have influence on spouse adjustment, and if issues related to them were not addressed, they could contribute negatively to adjustment. For example, if the family lived in a rural area in a big house, moving to a small apartment in the middle of a city might not be pleasant for the spouse. Or, if the family comes from a place where eating out is cheap and they do it frequently, it might not be possible to eat out as much in Finland due to the price of food. These changes might significantly impact the daily habits of the family if one person now needs to cook more than they are used to. Even though these factors do not have as big of an importance on the spouse adjustment as the social factors, they are still fundamental to the initial adjustment, and the feasibility for Company X to assist spouses is high. Therefore it is recommended that these factors are taken into account when planning the practical support activities at Company X.

Based on the interview results, I suggest that Company X should focus their support efforts in the factors that are placed above the dotted line in Figure 10. I present the more concrete recommended initiatives derived from this position in Chapter 5.

5 Recommended initiatives to support spouses' adjustment

In the next chapters, this study proposes recommended initiatives for Company X on how they could further support expatriate spouses' adjustment based on the theoretical framework and the analysis of the data collected through the semi-structured theme interviews and the group interview.

5.1 Make sure the pre-visit is focused on its original purpose, not client work

All spouses interviewed reported that they had been on a weeklong pre-visit to Finland. The purpose of the pre-visit is to get acquainted with the new living environment and to find accommodation for the expatriate and family. One interviewee mentioned that the expatriate was not able to participate in the apartment viewings due to work commitments that the expatriate's local team had scheduled for the same visit. The HR representative mentioned similar experiences with other expatriates whose spouses were not interviewed for this study (Interviewee B 26 July 2018.) This puts pressure on the spouse, as they are then alone responsible for acquiring the family's new home. In addition, it negates the purpose of the pre-visit and is not fair towards the expatriate either.

It seems that in the past some pre-visits have been timed based on client meetings instead of when it would be convenient for home searching. This presents a challenge as home search is very time-sensitive and dependent on the housing market. Due to availability and notice period, the search is best to be conducted the previous month prior to moving. Therefore, if client meetings need to be set up at a certain time other than the month before moving, it is recommended that the pre-visit is not coincided with these meetings.

In order to give the assignee and spouse the best possible beginning for the assignment, it is recommended that the pre-visit should be reserved for its original purpose of getting to know the living area and finding a home. If it is necessary for the assignee to participate in client meetings during the pre-visit, the length of the pre-visit should be considered to be extended by a couple of days.

5.2 Provide (mandatory) assignment training for both assignee and spouse after arrival in Finland

The benefits of assignment and intercultural training were discussed in the literature review section (Chapter 2.4.3), and were brought up in the interviews as well. Assignment training could assist in smoothing out the culture novelty aspects spouses may face in

their adjustment. As it is evident that the home country HR does not offer assignment training or intercultural training to the Company X expatriates, it is recommended that all expatriates and spouses are offered assignment training after they have arrived in Finland.

The timing is important as the interviewees reported that they felt they would not have had time to participate in a training before arriving to Finland due to the tight schedule and having so many administrative tasks to take care of related to the move itself in the home country. In addition, the problems regarding adjustment do not usually present themselves until a little later in the process. Therefore, it is recommended that the training is scheduled to be held within the first two months after arrival in Finland.

Even though assignment training is said to have more benefits to expatriates and spouses who do not have much prior international experience, the recommendation is still to include the training to all arriving expatriates and spouses' schedules. Prior experience does not automatically mean that the person has acquired the intercultural skills needed to have a successful assignment. It is also good to have the expatriate and spouse contemplate on the adjustment process together: The training can bring up new point of views on the process, and the trainer can facilitate discussion on these matters, which the couples may not have taken into account before (Interviewee A 18 July 2018).

Assignment training can address multiple factors of spouse adjustment at once: social support from a host country national to understand local culture and the behavior of locals, mental support to understand one's own situation to aid identity reconstruction, and support to cope with changing family dynamics.

5.3 Provide personal contact and support throughout the adjustment process

All of the spouses interviewed indicated they would have liked to have personal contact with someone who would have been able to provide support on everyday matters and to ask ad-hoc questions. All interviewees said that in the early stages of the process, they received support on the administrative logistical side of things, but would have liked to have someone available to answer questions that arose later on. The following initiatives present forms of personal contact Company X can adopt.

Email address in the beginning of the assignment

The simplest way to ask the ad-hoc questions and to provide personal contact is to offer the spouses an email address at the very beginning of their assignment to which they can

address any issues or questions they have then and later on. This can be an HR representative's personal work email, or a joint email of the team for instance. Making sure the spouse is aware of the address in addition to the expatriate is important since generally the employee has more venues than the spouse to ask questions.

Personal contact to check on adjustment progress

It is recommended that an HR representative is in touch with the expatriate and spouse after two months or so of arrival to check in on them to see how they are doing. A phone call, and email, or a short meeting at the office would suffice. The challenge here is the resources that would need to be allocated to the contact. On the other hand, a phone call would most likely not take more than 15-30 minutes.

Online survey to check on adjustment process

Another option is to send a short questionnaire to the expatriate and spouse after two months of residing in Finland to see how their adaptation has gone so far and if they need help with anything specific. The survey can be automated, and does not require a lot of effort. The results can be directly emailed to the HR representative and team members' email address. The survey would be an easy way for HR to find out if the family has any issues. It would also produce measurable metrics on expatriates' and their spouses' adjustment, which could later on be utilized to develop the processes.

Mentor program

Company X could create a small pool of mentors for the expatriates and their spouses. They could send out a message to staff members, for example locals who have been on assignments themselves and put together a group who would then be available to offer support and answer possible questions the expatriates may encounter throughout their assignment. The mentorship is based on volunteer work, and there could be low-key networking events organized at the Company X office throughout the year where all expatriates, their spouses and mentors could meet. Having an assigned mentor could make the threshold of contacting someone lower for the spouses, and they would not feel quite so alone with the everyday problems they may encounter.

HR representatives would of course still be available for the expatriates and spouses to reach out to in case they had more complicated matters to deal with. However, the possible mentor pool program would also mean that the scarce HR resources would not necessarily need to be utilized so widely for mundane everyday issues.

All of these four methods of personal contact above could make the expatriate family feel they are valued and that the organization is showing interest in their adjustment.

New service model for external clients

Based on the interviews, a new service model to respond to ad-hoc questions is proposed. As mentioned in the beginning, Company X also provides relocation and immigration services for their external clients. Much like Company X's internal HR department, the client organizations' HR departments can face similar resourcing issues with assisting their employees and their spouses with the adjustment in Finland after arrival. The proposed service is described in more detail in Appendix 4 (confidential). A service like this could take some of the HR department's workload off, and would ensure the client organizations' employees and families felt like they received the necessary assistance at the right time.

5.4 Provide assistance in creating networks

Social support

All interviewees expressed difficulties meeting local people and creating social networks. The mentor program suggested in Chapter 5.3 is one way to support spouses in creating a support network in Finland. In addition to the mentor program, spouses could potentially be included in some other corporate events. For example, Company X organizes a laid-back hangout at the office quarterly, where employees are invited to spend a couple hours after the workday in a relaxed, nonwork-related atmosphere. The events have a theme, and are organized by different departments in turn. Expatriate spouses could be welcomed to join. This way they could meet new people to grow their network in the host country. Informal events where expatriates and their spouses and children would be welcome as well could be beneficial, or providing babysitting services so that spouses with young children at home could attend events by themselves if they wanted to.

Another way Company X could support social networking is hosting networking events. Company X has an existing network of expatriates and their spouses through the services they have provided their external clients. Company X could organize networking events geared towards the spouses, and invite their own expatriates' spouses to participate in the events. The topics of the events could vary, and the events could be held outside of the Company X offices: e.g., having guest lecturers who could host the event, wine tasting, or a Finnish delicacies baking class. The options here are countless. The events can be less lavish, in case they are free of charge, but some of them could also be for a fee, and could be marketed to external clients as a form of spousal support.

Indirect support activities, which do not require too many resources from Company X, could include keeping lists of social clubs, expatriate networking forums, and professional networking forums. These could then be shared with the spouses, if they aspire assistance in socializing.

Naturally, friendships cannot be forced, but offering some platforms for the spouses to get out of their home and meet new people is better than not acknowledging them at all.

Professional support

Research on dual-career issues suggests that professional support is one of the most important forms of support for spouses. This study uncovered that many spouses who are in Finland on shorter assignments either choose not to work, are entrepreneurs, or continue working for their previous employer remotely. Job search assistance might be more significant to expatriate spouses, whose partners are in Finland on a local contract, but at the time of conducting this study there were not that many cases like that at Company X.

However, it would be beneficial for Company X to have some information of local job markets and networking options at hand, in case it turns out some spouses would like to find employment. A full on job search assistance program might need to be incorporated later on since the volume of expatriates is growing and many of the new arrivals are dual-career couples.

Because the practices of applying for a job can be very different in Finland than in the home countries of spouses, it is recommended that Company X has available a short introduction to how to apply for jobs in Finland already at the time of the pre-visit to Finland. This would allow the spouse to prepare their CV and gather possible material needed already before relocating to Finland.

In addition, as Company X holds informational events to their external clients on various topics, it could be worthwhile providing the spouses the opportunity to participate in those events. Company X could offer to add the spouses on their invitation lists if the topics are of interest to the spouse. This could support the spouses' professional career and alleviate the identity recreation stress.

Providing assistance in job related matters for the spouses who are interested in working could help in other factors of adjustment as well. If the spouse finds employment, they will naturally form social connections with co-workers, and receive organizational support through their own work, which would result in Company X not needing to put that many resources in other aspects of the adjustment for the employed individual.

5.5 Provide language training to spouse

Participants to the group interview mentioned that Company X provides their partners Finnish language courses in Finland, but the spouse was not allowed to participate. It is recommended that the spouse would be able to participate in the training together with the expatriate. Spouses mentioned it would motivate the expatriate to take the courses if they were able to do it together with their spouse; they could support each other in the learning, and it would not be additional time spent apart in addition to work. After all, Adler (2008, 314) suggests acquiring the local language skills would potentially benefit the spouse even more than the expatriate since the spouse is most likely dealing with the locals with everyday matters more than the expatriate, who is often occupied by work. If language training is not provided directly, Company X could at least have a list of available options to study Finnish available to hand out to spouses.

5.6 Send online survey after returning to home country

The Company X HR representative indicated that the company does not collect feedback from the expatriates and their spouses on their relocation and adjustment process in Finland. It could be worthwhile to send a short online survey to the expatriates and spouses after they have returned to their home countries to see find out their experience regarding the whole process. It could provide invaluable information to the HR department on how the process can be improved.

6 Conclusions

This research was conducted in order to find out how Company X could support their internal expatriates' spouses in their adjustment process. The next chapters will recap the outcomes of the study, look at research ethics, suggest future research topics and discuss my personal learnings.

6.1 Outcomes

At the beginning of the project, I set out to find answers to the research question: "How can Company X support expatriate employees' spouses in their adjustment process?" I broke this down into sub-questions, which would aid me in unearthing answers to the main research question:

1. What are the main factors that affect the adjustment of the spouses of expatriate employees during an international assignment?
2. In addition to these general factors, what unique challenges do these spouses face when moving to Finland specifically?
3. What can firms in general do to improve the adjustment of their employees' spouses during international assignments?
4. What sort of initiative could Company X utilize to improve their expatriate spouses' adjustment?

Examining literature and existing theories and interviewing Company X's Assignment Training Coach contributed to finding answers to support questions related to the factors affecting spouse adjustment and organizational support activities. Exploring the experiences of Company X expatriates' spouses helped me to find explanations to what challenges spouses face relocating to Finland, what type of support they received, and what support they would have needed. Interviewing Company X representatives gave me insight into the organization's policies and practices on expatriate management.

I used semi-structured theme interviews and a group interview as a qualitative research method to explore spouses' experiences on their adjustment process. Qualitative research with an abductive approach was the right choice to conduct this study. A combination of theory and research findings provided a good basis for creating the recommendations to Company X. The research did end up providing an understanding of a phenomenon through meanings of individuals. A quantitative questionnaire alone would not have been able to provide such detailed information since I was able to ask follow up questions and

the interviewees were able to then elaborate more on the topic. The result was that the interviews were able to uncover themes that would probably have gone unnoticed if the study were conducted with an online questionnaire, for example.

Semi-structured theme interviews worked very well to reveal participants' experiences and to answer the support questions to the research question. However, it turned out that the group interview conducted after the implementation cycle provided valuable information and complemented the initial data set. Without the group interview, the results would have been slightly different, and not quite as comprehensive; they would have missed a perspective on a few factors affecting the research topic. Some of the initial drafted recommendations were adjusted based on the results of the group interview to form the final recommendations.

Based on the literature review and interviews conducted, this study found that spouse adjustment is comprised of three types of adjustment: personal, social, and general/cultural adjustment. The main factors that contribute to the adjustment are 1) personal, 2) social, 3) cultural/environmental, and 4) work factors. Effective organizational support plays a significant role in the positive intercultural adjustment of the spouse. The two areas where spouses need assistance the most are practical matters throughout the assignment and social support.

Overall, the research produced worthwhile, practical information that will benefit Company X in their efforts to improve their services to expatriates and their spouses. The next phase of the action research would be for Company X to continue with implementation of the recommended initiatives based on the Importance vs. Feasibility chart (Chapter 4.8). My recommendation on the next steps is as follows:

- 1) Set up an email account, which is monitored by multiple people, and provide the email address to all internal expatriates and spouses to provide support
- 2) Set up internal guidelines on when and how to provide guidance on job searching for incoming spouses
- 3) Set up assignment training for all incoming expatriates and their spouses
- 4) Ensure that the offer to take Finnish language courses presented to expatriates is extended to the spouses as well
- 5) Come up with four themes for networking events, of which two will be held in the spring, and two in the fall of 2019. The events could be organized in cooperation with the external client serving team of Company X. Both internal expatriate

spouses and clients' expatriates and their spouses should be invited to allow more wide contact base for networking.

These five steps already provide very practical improvements for the spouses, and do not require that many resources from Company X. Of course I would recommend that Company X implements all recommended initiatives, but these five would be a good start. While I think these are good proposals, I think it is also important to highlight some limitations of the work of this study. Specifically, the scope of this study was only to build the model and test one initiative. Other scope limitations are discussed in Chapter 1.1. To really understand if the proposed model is strong, Company X will have to test it with a wide variety of initiatives and over a longer period of time. Also, the model only focuses on two main elements (Feasibility, and Importance on positive spouse adjustment), and therefore Company X should also consider if any other elements should be integrated into their decision-making process around this problem.

To summarize, I believe this thesis was overall a very good look into Company X's challenges, and provides them a good path forward for improving the services they provide to their expatriates and their spouses. There is more work to be done, but they now have a framework model in which they can test new ideas and build a more comprehensive service package for both internal and external accompanying spouses.

Since intercultural adjustment can be described as the psychological comfort with different aspects of the host country, individual capabilities play a big role in how much support expatriate spouses need in their adjustment. One could say relocation and adjustment to a new culture is a journey to self, and requires contemplation about oneself. In other words, new situations could prompt behaviors in the person that they were not aware of in the safety of their familiar surroundings at home. Relocation to a new country can be taxing psychologically, and some cope better with stress than others. This means the level of support needed is dependent on the individual and support activities need to be tailored case by case.

Spouses do not have the structure and routine that work brings to the expatriate, and they often need to build their social network from ground up by themselves. Lack of relationships can bring forth feelings of loneliness. Organizational support is important, especially since the company representative is one of the first support contacts spouses have in the new country. Even more important is maybe how spouses perceive the support they have received. Merely providing the very basic practical assistance is not sufficient. Spouses need to feel valued by the organization.

Organizations should bear in mind that even though assignment contracts mainly include aspects of the employees' relocation, and on paper they are only responsible of the well-being of the employee, spouses are a big part of the package. Uprooting one's life to move to a new country due to partner's work might cause big emotional struggles throughout the assignment. Understandably, organizations' main concern is on the business, but human capital is the biggest asset Company X has, and therefore it is worth investing in – especially since they have already made the initial investment of bringing the expatriate in the country. It is crucial that organizations consider spouse adjustment in the international assignment process.

6.2 Research ethics

Company X Assignment Coach mentored me with preparing for the semi-structured theme interviews. I presented what themes I had thought about incorporating, and the coach gave their opinion and input on what they thought would be beneficial and relevant.

Regarding seeking access (Saunders & al. 2016, 249), no participant was pressured to participate in the research. Spouses were invited to participate and those interviewed signed up free-willingly. The Company X HR representative was involved in data collection. The representative gave me a list of expatriates who had an accompanying spouse with them on the assignment. The representative also sent the expatriates an initial email about possible participation of their spouses on my behalf. I knew two of the expatriates personally, and was able to approach them myself. The expatriates then either provided me with their spouse's email address or put me in direct contact with the spouse. I did not know any of the interviewees personally. The group interview participants were invited to join similarly, but in addition, the email invitation sent to expatriates contained a sign up link to the event so that spouses could sign up themselves. The HR representative knows who were interviewed, but does not know their individual responses.

The participants were informed that their names would not appear in the report. Overall, this report does not specify by name any of the participants or the name of the two Company X representatives interviewed. I attempted to present the analysis findings in a way that no individual respondent would be recognized from the report. It was also clarified that the individual interviewees' responses would be used in analyzing how Company X's support activities could be improved, and group interview participants' opinions would be used to test the analysis findings and to improve on the drafted recommendations for Company X. I offered to share the final product with the participants should they be interested in reading the report.

I tried to prevent my own bias from affecting the semi-structured theme interviews by not trying to limit the interviewees' answers to the pre-set themes. Instead, I attempted to pose follow-up questions if the interviewees mentioned something interesting I had not initially considered important to my research. In addition, I used paraphrasing and repetition as a means to make sure I understood what the interviewee meant. I also used direct quotes from the respondents in the report to support the response interpretations.

Even though I was employed by the commissioning organization at the time of conducting the study, and was working in the same field this research focuses on, I did not provide services to the study participants. I did exchange emails with the partner of one participant to aid them with immigration related questions while the HR representative was on vacation, but was not responsible for the service. I also do not have any commercial interest towards the internal expatriates of Company X, where it would cause me to force any results due to a conflict of interest.

6.3 Further research

This study is limited to a cross-sectional view of spouses' adjustment. The initial preconception was that the expatriate adjustment is affected by the spouse's adjustment, and I deliberately did not focus on the expatriate adjustment since there is quite a lot more research on that topic existing. Therefore, only spouses' experiences on their own adjustment were sought in this study. It would be interesting to do a longitudinal research of spouses' adjustment by following a handful of new expatriate spouses from the start of their assignment until repatriation. Expatriate spouses could be requested to keep a diary and online surveys could be sent out periodically covering different aspects.

Although the impact of family's adjustment on the assignment is nowadays more widely acknowledged, it seems that the support for spouses is still quite limited in many companies. Future research could focus on how big of an impact spouse's adjustment has on the expatriate employee's job satisfaction and success of the assignment. This could give companies motivation to support spouses and an idea of what level of support is necessary in future. In addition, it seems to be a current trend in developing desirable employing organizations to promote the view of employees as individuals and not just mere resources. The work-life balance angle comes into play as factors outside of work affect job performance. This is a factor in attracting talent, and understanding which factors influence expatriates' job satisfaction and promote good work-life balance can be key to retain top talent. This could be a good topic for future research.

The amount of dual-career couples is rising among modern expatriates. Even four out of eight participants of this study were working to some extent during the assignment, and three were either looking or considering looking for employment. Another interesting scope extension to this study could be to incorporate a section about how dual-career couples organize the spouse's career when they relocate due to their partner's work. That was not the focus of this study, even though it was mentioned in the literature review and brushed upon in the analysis, but it would be very interesting to know more about this area.

Finally, the number of female expatriates and thus accompanying male spouses is on the rise. There is not much research yet on the adjustment of the male spouses specifically. The gender question was not addressed in this study to safeguard the anonymity of the two male respondents. It would be interesting to see what type of differences, if any, there are in comparison to the more traditional view of female spouse adjustment.

6.4 Assessment of my learning

This research has given me the opportunity to dive into the theory of international assignments and the related adjustment process. Even though I have worked in the global mobility industry for a few years now, I was relatively new to the theoretical aspects, as I have acquired my skills from practice. It was very rewarding to note how much information I have already attained through working, but also fascinating to dig deeper through this study.

It has been quite a few years since my undergrad days, and working on this study was a nice refresher on the academic research methods. Using theme interviews and group interview as data collection method was new to me. Interviewing the participants proved to be one of the most fun parts of the study for me. If I could go back, I would probably interview one or two more individuals in the initial data collection phase. I feel having a larger data set would have made finding the connecting themes in the data clearer. Although it would also have meant more material to go through, which would have taken more time.

Even though I think the choice of qualitative interviews as the data collection method served this study well, if I was to change something, I would probably now use a mixed-method research and incorporate an online questionnaire to supplement the interview findings. I think it would have given a bit broader view on the matter. Creating new theory was not the main focus of this research in the first place, but having larger data pool could have supported generalizability more.

I enjoyed discussing with the expatriate spouses about their experiences. Working does not always give that level of insight since the assistance is often focused more on the administrative help and is limited to the very beginning of the process. The study gave me an opportunity to see beyond the early stages of the adjustment process. It also allowed me to focus fully on the people behind the process, as I did not need to worry about providing the service myself.

Planning the thesis project required project management skills. The hardest part proved to be sticking to the set schedule, partially because of personal reasons as I had my daughter in the middle of the process. In hindsight, I would absolutely begin and complete the study development process before having my baby. In general, I probably should have focused on the thesis from the beginning of my studies in order to derive resources for the development process from the courses I took along the couple of years of my MBA studies when everything was fresh in my mind.

I struggled with the structure of the thesis report. I had to keep reminding myself that the most important matter is to try to present the process in a way that makes the reader understand what was done and why, and what the end result was. It was challenging for me to create a clear structure as I was too deep in the process myself to see the big picture at times. If I could do this process again, I would focus on building the structure better from day one. However, as daunting as a big venture like this can seem at the beginning, completing the study development process gave me confidence in my academic writing skills. As a result of completing this project, I realized that producing text is one of my strong suits, but I need to develop big picture thinking in my personal and professional life.

To summarize, this project was a very good learning opportunity for me, both academically and professionally. I believe I will be able to utilize the knowledge I obtained on the subject matter through doing this project in my work moving forward. I hope Company X will gain tangible value from this project.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions to Company X's assignment training coach

Q1: In your experience, what affects spouse adjustment on international assignments?

Q2: What are the typical difficulties spouses face when relocating to a new country?

Q3: What is the role of assignment training?

Appendix 2. Interview questions to Company X's HR representative

Q1: What is the current process of receiving new international assignees?

Q2: How does the current assignment policy take into account the family of the assignee?

Q3: What kind of support does the HR function offer assignees? What is the level of support to spouses?

Q4: What kind of support do spouses need?

Q5: Do the possible problems with spouses' adjustment process become visible to the HR function? For example, do they have an effect on the assignees' work?

Q6: Have you experienced situations where a spouse had difficulties adjusting?

Q6: Does the HR function have the needed resources to support spouse adjustment?

Q7: What would help the HR function in supporting the spouse? (E.g. changing the policies, outsourcing vs. in-house, more staff)

Appendix 3. Semi-structured theme interview for the spouses of Company X's expatriates

Theme 1: Prior experience, expectations, living conditions, cultural matters

Example questions:

- Please tell me about your life back in [country]. What was it like?
- Please describe your (current) situation in Finland.
- Can you describe differences/similarities between living in Finland compared to your home country/culture?
- What did you know about Finland before moving here? Did you visit prior to moving?
- Did you receive assignment/intercultural training prior to moving or in Finland? (spouse's employer, other service providers)
- What expectations did you have before moving? Were they met?

Theme 2: Factors that affected adjustment to Finland

Example questions:

- Can you describe how you have adapted to living in Finland?
- What do/did you enjoy in Finland? (examples)
- Can you give examples of the factors that made your adjustment in Finland easier?
- What kind of difficulties do/did you face in your everyday life in Finland?
- Can you describe issues you considered difficult in the adjustment process?
- What could organizations do to help you to adjust?

Theme 3: Social networks

Example questions:

- How did you meet new people?
- Through which forums did you connect with new people?
- Did you have anyone who you confide in if you had issues in Finland? And if so, who? (e.g., friends/family back home, your spouse, new friends or people here in Finland)

Theme 4: Support

Example questions:

- Can you give examples of situations where you felt you could have used help?
- In what type of situations did you find the need for assistance?
- If you faced difficulties in adjustment, where do/did you look for information? (internet searches, spouse's employer, existing network, social media, information package provided by Company X, other)

Appendix 4. A new service model for Company X's external clients (confidential)

This appendix contained a written description of a new service model for Company X. The description was complemented with a picture of the service description to be used for advertising the service to clients as well as a picture of the description to be added to written client proposals.

The picture headlines are shown in this appendix to keep the original page numbering.

Proposal page with the new service model

picture redacted

Service description to potential clients

picture redacted

Appendix 5. Implementation: Slides presented at the event

These slides have been slightly modified style-wise; they were originally on Company X brand slides. The content remains the same.

Adjusting to Life in Finland

MARCH 2019

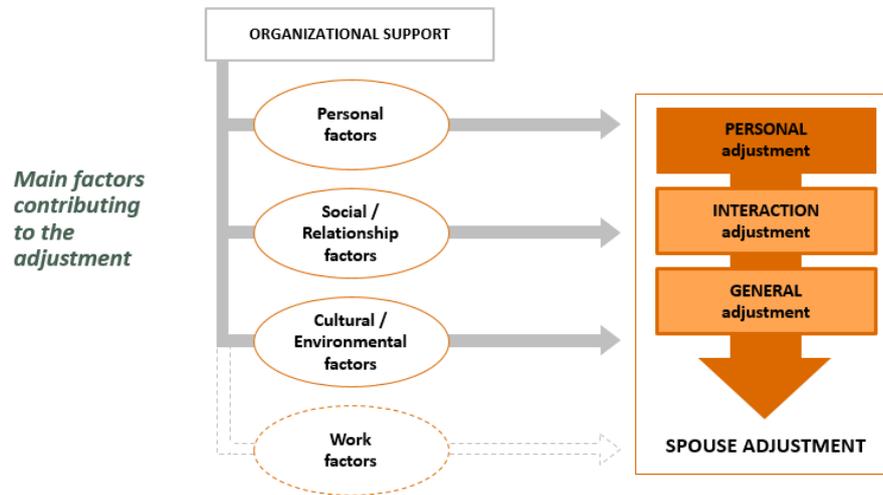
Research

How can [Company X] support our expats' spouses adjust to life in Finland?

- What are the main factors that affect adjustment of the spouses of expatriate employees during an international assignment?
- In addition to these general factors, what unique challenges do these spouses face when moving to Finland specifically?
- What can firms in general do to improve the adjustment of their employees' spouses during international assignments?
- What sort of initiative could [Company X] utilize to improve their expatriate spouses' adjustment?



Theoretical framework



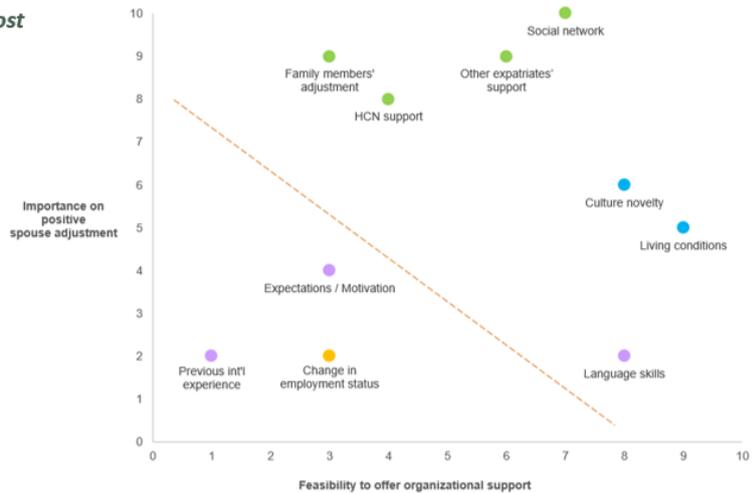
March 2019

3

Findings

Spouses need the most assistance with:

- 1) practical matters throughout the assignment
- 2) social support



March 2019

4

Recommendations

- 1) Make sure the pre-visit is focused on its original purpose, not client work
- 2) Provide (mandatory) assignment training for both assignee and spouse after arrival in Finland
- 3) Provide personal contact and support throughout the adjustment process:
 - Personal contact by HR to check on adjustment progress (phone call or meeting)
 - Online survey to check on adjustment process
 - Mentor program
 - Chat bot

March 2019

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Recommendations

- 4) Provide assistance in creating networks
 - Social support:
 - Firm events (spouses included)
 - Family events
 - Networking events with other expatriates (external clients)
 - Indirect support: lists of e.g. social clubs, expatriate networking forums, and professional networking forums
- Professional support
 - Information of local job markets and networking options
 - Invitations to [Company X]'s client events – joining mailing list

March 2019

6

Kiitos!
