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## **Communication challenges in an expatriate program**

**Case company: IKEA Ltd**

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<p>Multinational companies offer various different possibilities to their employees to travel and work abroad. These kind of expatriate programs are usually closely linked with talent management and offer great opportunities for employees in a company to advance faster in their careers along with gaining new experiences, relationships and skills. Companies as well can benefit from well organized expatriate programs by finding new talents and grounding them to the company as well as learning new best practises to implement in different functions.</p> <p>Yet, structuring a well designed expatriate has proven to be a great challenges for many companies. There has been numerous situations where expatriate programs have been created in haste without proper investigation or tools to measure the successfulness of the program.</p> <p>The author had the opportunity to research a newly established expatriate program in IKEA Ltd. called The Backpacker Journey. Together with program and communication managers a survey was designed based on the feedback received from both expatriates and other program managers. These issues concerned mainly communication and were the base for the whole expatriate program research.</p> <p>A survey was constructed, sent and analyzed between three months period in 2010 and 2011. The results revealed both known and unknown challenges in communication and cross-cultural aspects such as lack of participation in planing and communicating process between managers and expatriates competencies in working abroad. A communication plan was designed based on the findings of the survey to ensure The Backpackers Journeys success in a longer-term.</p> <p>This thesis aspires to show different challenges that expatriates programs can bring to a company planning or implementing an expatriate program. The author will also give improvement suggestions for The backpacker Journey in IKEA. These suggestions are based both in the theory and results received from the actual survey.</p>	
<b>Keywords</b> expatriate program, cross-cultural communication, international aspect	

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# 1. Introduction

Expatriate programs have been a way for companies to compete successfully in the global market. Expatriate programs are a part of a general realization where the focus of the core competencies has been shifted towards Human Resource Management. Companies have acknowledged that by providing their workers training and development opportunities as a way to build their stock of human capital internationally. Since companies are eager to send the workers abroad, the importance of providing the right tools for an expatriate in the new culture have been downsized or even neglected due to factors such as time and costs.

There are various reasons why companies are interested in expatriate programs. Expatriate programs offer possibilities for companies' talented employees to broaden their views of the company, gain experiences and networks over normal company borders. In a corporate level companies have the opportunity to share and learn new better ways of doing things locally. The expatriate program can also provide companies with an insight of the their internal communications and possible control mechanism for adapting the company policies and views. Yet a well-organized and working expatriate program is far from easy as expatriate failures are quit common. (Dowling et al. 2008, 139)

The idea for this thesis came from interest shared by from both the author and IKEA Ltd side. IKEA global HR had launched a new expatriate program called as Backpacker Journey six month prior to this research. The programs idea was to give people with high potential to go and work in other IKEA stores around the world. The author was at the time doing his work placement in IKEA Finland's land organization's HR department and was interested to be part of the research, which was in the end given to him to construct and analyse.

The IKEA Global HR, which purpose is to support and advise IKEA stores globally had been planning a survey based on the information and feedback that they had already received from different participants in the backpacker journey. The goal was to discover more in depth how did the people involved in the program felt about whole process. The survey gave new insight to issues already known in the programs as well

new information regarding the general knowledge of the whole backpacker journey and communication issues between participants. It also confirmed some already known problems in the program relating to the planning of the backpacker's assignment and other support functions that a backpacker was suppose to have. Based on the results of the survey a communication plan was designed for both executives and store level HR manager to improve the Backpacker journeys and so ensure the programs success.

## **1.1 Background of the IKEA Backpacker Journey**

The backpacker journey is first of its kind established in IKEA Ltd. The program is divided in to two six month work periods in two different countries with tasks designed by Line Managers and Backpacker host in the country. (Rules for backpackers in the IKEA group p. 4) The survey was executed after the first backpacker assignment had ended, and the program covered only European Retailers before advancing to global stages in the second journey.

Author had no earlier secondary information regarding the program, which meant he had to build the survey based on the existing information and feedback that the talent manager and IKEA global HR had already received from the participants from the Backpacker Journey. The focus of the survey was build around issued concerning communication as IKEA global HR had already received some feedback from different parties mainly relating to the matter. The goal of the survey was to find out if the communication between different parties participating in the Backpacker Journey is sufficient and how the possible communication issues could be improved for ensuring the successfulness of the program.

## **1.2 Research problem and the international aspect**

The objectives of this survey are based on the needs of IKEA Ltd. The survey provides new information on the Backpacker Journey and in this way contributes to the success. The research ´s main focus is to find out if there is enough communication between parties participating in the backpacker journey. The key issue is to determine what kind of challenges the parties see in the communication. The author wanted also cover some areas relating the cultural aspects in the program. In

the light of communication, several issues are important from the author's perspective: the importance of employees understanding their role in program, the core purpose of the whole program and the actual expectations of the expatriates.

The key issues concerning cultural aspects were: what kind of cultural challenges backpackers have experienced during their first assignment in the host country, what issues have made the adjustment to the local culture easier and visa versa, how these challenges have been faced, have the backpackers received enough support from IKEA Mobility and other parties. These questions were based on the feedback that IKEA global HR had already received from different participants. Thus these issues were examined more closely to see how in general all of the participants felt about them.

This research is first of its kind to be done and it is directed to everyone participating in the Backpacker Journey including the following parties: line managers, local HR, Country HR, backpacker host, backpackers, the country backpacker responsible and lastly, other IKEA co-workers that applied to the program, but were not selected to the program. The purpose of the research is to get a clearer picture of the issues relating to communication and the whole Backpacker Journey. The author will also give his suggestions on how to improve the upcoming journey based on the findings of the research.

The findings of this thesis will benefit the IKEA global HR and Mobility to improve the quality of the Backpacker Journey program and ensure its success during next five years.

Other companies that are executing or planning similar kind of expatriate program might also benefit from these finding. Lastly, the author himself will benefit from this research by gaining new insight on executing and developing an expatriate program, as this is his first time being a part of a corporate based one.

The author designed the main research question to be following:

**“Has there been sufficient information, support and feedback between different parties of the IKEA Backpacker Journey. What kind a challenges has culture**

**brought to the communication and how could the overall communication be improved?”**

The investigative questions were to be as following:

1. Has there been any challenge in communication between the Line Managers, Backpacker Host and Country Backpacker Responsible?
2. How do other parties perceive the support and instructions given by the Staff Human Resources and Mobility?
3. How do the Backpackers perceive the communication between: Line Manager and Backpacker Host?
4. What is the communication like between country HR and Local HR?

### **1.3 The scope of the study**

The thesis is preliminary research based on a survey that is shared among 400 people representing the various parties in the backpacker journey across Europe. Its purpose is to find out how the communication between different participants are shared and received. It will hopefully give an insight in how people understand the purpose of whole program and what possible improvements could be done to guarantee its success. Author will also provide suggestions on what kind of issues should be noticed when executing an expatriate program and what kind of communicational challenges it brings to the company, such as cross-cultural training and language skills.

The survey has been built on the demands set out by IKEA global HR. Specific information on the results and conclusions are not dealt specifically, but generally in this thesis due to the wishes of IKEA Ltd. The author will give his own suggestion and recommendations for the future of the program in the end of the thesis.

### **1.4 Research methods**

The author used quantitative data collection since it is used in business to measure consumer behaviour, knowledge, opinions or attitudes (Donald & Pamela, 161-162). The quantitative method was selected also due other more circumstantial factors such



as the tight schedule set out by IKEA global HR to execute the survey and the large sample size covering the whole Europe. Author considered adding possible qualitative features to the survey, but IKEA global HR decided in the end that time and cost factors of executing these interviews would not have been possible.

IKEA had already an existing platform to create and send the quantitative questionnaire, making it easier and faster to reach the different parties in short-term. The questionnaire was send out via e-mail containing information on why the survey was being done and the link to the questionnaire in IKEA intra net. The author and IKEA global HR were aware of the challenges that Internet based surveys bring, but came to the conclusion that it was the alternative in the given time period. To gain as high response rate as possible three letters were send to the co-workers containing information about the survey. The first letter was sent one-week prior the actual survey, explaining why this research was done and encouraging people to participate in it. Second letter included the link to the survey and additional information, such as the average answering time and the e-mail addresses of both the talent manager and author in case of any questions. Third letter was send week after the second letter reminding the people to participate before given time period was closed for the survey.

## 1.5 Key concepts

**Communication** is one of the main key concepts of this thesis. There are many interpretations on what communications is. In the basic level it can be described as “ the simultaneous encoding, decoding and interpretation of verbal and nonverbal messages between people” (W.Neuplier. 2009).

**Cross-cultural communication** relates to the expatriates personal qualities. There is consensus about some of these attributes that a person should have. These include followings: adaptability, diplomacy, positive attitude, language ability, emotional stability, cultural empathy and maturity. Even as these attributes exist and are recognized the problem of assessing these qualities in expatriates remains difficult. (Dowling et al 2008.)

**Expatriate** is a person who has been assigned to work abroad through his company for a certain amount of period, usually between three and twelve months. Expatriates are usually closely connected with companies' talent pool. They are sent to another country not only to gain more experience and establish new relationships, but also to represent the company and help it to possibly establish different ways of working benefiting the company as a whole. On the other hand, there are many risks concerning a possible expatriate failure where the expatriate returns to his home country before the given task has been successfully finished.

**International communication** appears when two or more people from different cultures communicate with each other.

**Co – worker** is an employee who is working for IKEA Co. (IKEA Guide for Backpackers, 2010)

**The home country** refers to the country where the employee is employed before and during the transfer.

(IKEA Guide for Backpackers, 2010)

**IKEA Mobility Support – Mobility** is the organisation within the IKEA that is centrally responsible for handling general aspects of Backpacker assignments

**Backpacker**, In this text the term “backpacker” refers to an IKEA employee identified as high potential with the desire to work in different organisations, countries and processes to develop both professionally and personally. (IKEA Guide for Backpackers, 2010)

**The backpacker host** is the person in the host country who provides job training assignments for the employee and acts as a leader for the duration of the assignment in their country. (IKEA Guide for Backpackers, 2010)

**The Country Backpacker responsible** is the person in the host country responsible for finding housing for the Backpackers, assisting in arranging permits and visas, and providing information on finding local information in the host country. The country

Backpacker responsible is also the link to the global Talent Manager. (IKEA Guide for Backpackers, 2010)

**The line manager** is the direct manager of the employee in the home country. The line manager will remain responsible for the employee throughout the assignments in the host countries. The line manager will receive evaluation reports from Backpacker Hosts from both assignments. (IKEA Guide for Backpackers, 2010)

**Expatriate** is an employee who is working and temporarily residing in a foreign country” (J.Dowling, Festing & D. Engle, SR. 2008. International Human Resource Management. Fifth edition. Thompson Learning. UK

**Expatriate failure** is seen to occur when expatriate returns to his home country before ending of the international assignment. (J.Dowling et al. SR.2008, 112-113)

## 1.6 Timetable for the thesis

The survey was created between December 2010 and the January 2011. The respondents received the first letter in the end of January, one-week prior before the actual link was published. The collection and analyse of data took place during February, which ended when author was called to present the results in Helsingborg, Sweden.

The actual thesis process started in the autumn 2011, when author wrote most of his theory parts for the thesis and got approve. However the finishing of the whole thesis was postponed until the end of March 2012.

## 2. Communication

In this section the author will introduce the theoretical framework for the thesis. The theory will first cover the basic theory of communication process, from where it will continue to intercultural communication and cross-cultural communication. The theory will also go through the basic theory behind expatriate programs and why companies are interested in establishing such programs. Cultural issues will be handled in the light of intercultural training. The author will also try to tackle what kind of problems might merge when communication is interrupted. These theories were chosen as the author felt they would provide sufficient base relating to the original demands and interest that IKEA Global HR had set for the author in the beginning.

### 2.1 Definition of communication process

Communication can be seen as “central to understanding organizational behaviour” (Buchanan & Huczynski 2010, 202). It is related to every level of work done inside a company whether it is training, hiring or in this case expatriate program. There are several reasons why communication in any organization can be considered crucial. First, these days there are not many places where a person can work alone or without consulting managers whose work mostly involves interaction with other people. Individual career possibilities as well as the whole organizational performance are greatly affected by communication and in many cases it is also seen as problem for that reason. The on going development of technology as well as working in multi-cultural atmosphere has created challenges around cross-cultural communication and finding new patterns for communication. (Huczynski & Buchanan 2010, 202.)

The definition for communication in this thesis selected by the author is following:

“ Message exchange between two or more participants which is characterized by the intentional, conscious (at some level of awareness) use of mutually intelligible symbol system.”  
(Guirdham 2011, 88.)

Communication is by the definition an on going process of verbal and nonverbal communication. Communication as such is never received passively as it involves both

information and the manner how it is communicated. Communication is effective when both parties interpret manners and the meaning of one another. In general this however is not usually the case, communication so by should be seen as “error prone process.” (Huczynski & Buchanan 2010, 202.)

One of the most widely used models of communication is the communication process by described by Shannon & Weaver (1949, in Huczynski & Buchanan 2007, 178-179) presented in figure 1.

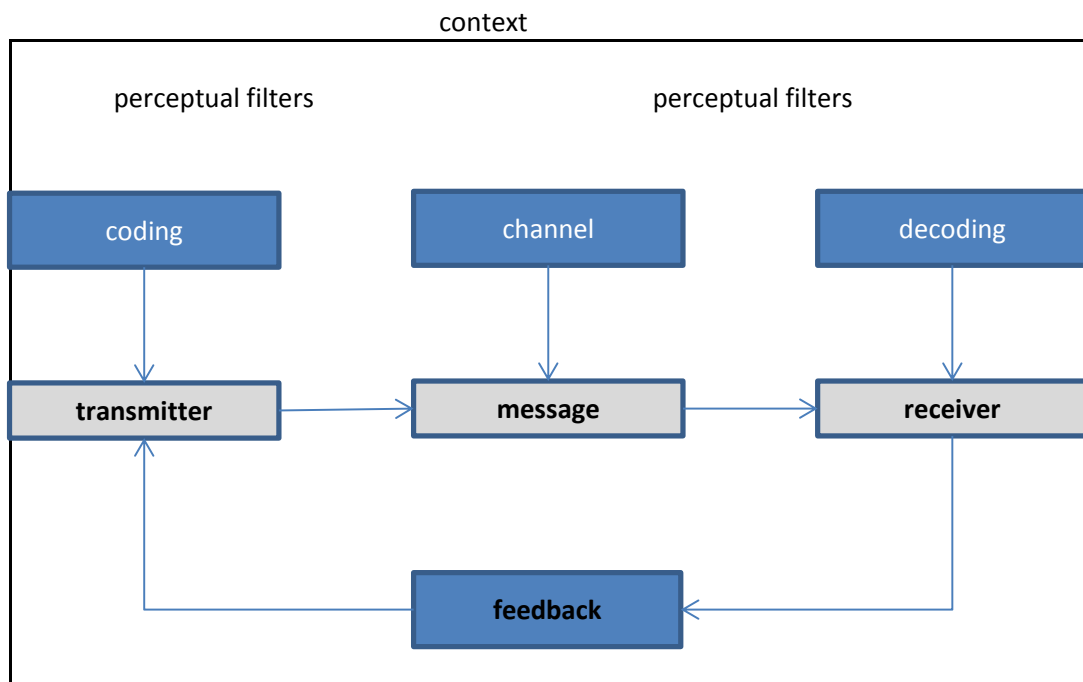


Figure 1. A model of the communication process (Shannon & Weaver 2007, 179)

The model presented in figure 1. describes clearly the basic communication process that starts from transmitter i.e. decoder or sender coding or decoding the message. This message is “coded” by the transmitter through his perceptions and feelings, which is then communication through oral or written channel for the receiver to decode the message. Such a channel can be, for example e-mail, face to face. (Huczynski & Buchanan 2007, 178.)

The decoding process starts when the receiver receives the transmitted coding by transmitter. Decoding process is a crucial part of the whole communication process as it is filtered through perceptual filters or noise as it described in the figure. The perceptual filters can be both receiver’s own predispositions and preoccupations that

affect the right understanding of the message or actual physical noise that appears during the transmitting process. (Huczynski & Buchanan 2007, 181.)

Lastly there is a feedback loop that constantly gives the transmitter information about how his information has been understood by the receiver. The feedback loops allows us to correct the possible mistakes that might have occurred during the face-to-face conversation. Usually both the transmitter and receiver receive the feedback straight during the conversation, such information as is the person interested, does he understand the message etc. A possible delay of the feedback might be a sign of wrongly interpreted message. In the feedback loop it is important to remember that the same possible of misunderstanding as in coding and decoding can occur. (Huczynski & Buchanan 2007, 181.)

## **2.2 Communication traits**

Analysing different behavioural phenomenon's trough traits have always been attempted; communication in this case is no different. A trait according to (Guirham 2011, 90) is

“a tendency to behave in a certain way in the judgement of the self others”

The communication trait theory can be connected to on going debate among scholars whether communication or languages are universal or non-universal. There are four communication traits mentioned by (Guirham 2011, 90) that are crucial for intercultural work context: rhetorical sensitivity, relational atonement, assertiveness and argumentativeness.

Rhetorical sensitive personality take notice on how other people are talking to him and makes an effort to adjust to the communication trough noticing various of the message such as moods, beliefs and knowledge. A person can also be extreme to both ends by being rhetorical reflective or rhetorical insensitive. Rhetorical reflective person moulds himself trough others perspectives in order to please them where as rhetorical insensitive person do not take any care or action to take notice other people emotions. People tend to all of the three according situations there are in, but overall it is argued that one of the three is somewhat dominant side of person. (Guirham 2011, 90-91)

Relational atonement is close to rhetorical sensitivity, but used in wider perspective than only the communicated message. A person relationally atonement takes notice the whole interactive behaviour and is attuned to others state there and now. In relational attunement the cultural-based differences are underlined to prove that being a member of a certain cultural group affects on persons cultural mirroring in a workplace and so has a great affect on how he experiences and performs in intercultural interactions. (Guirham 2011, 91-92)

Assertiveness as a trait has said to have strong relation to people that is prejudiced against them or sensible to situation where people are trying to put them down. Assertive personality put his own rights in front without interfering with others a long the way. It can be seen as balance between being aggression and submissive. An assertive personality priorities his own need first, he does not feel bad if declining a request or making a mistake in work. Assertiveness is studied to vary between different cultures as well as gender, for example in western culture assertive communication is find commonly especially in minority groups and women gender. (Guirham 2011, 92-93)

Argumentativeness is especially appreciated among managers towards their subordinates. As trait it means the willingness to take part in constructive debate. The ability to engage in an argument is according to Kim et al (2001, in Guirham 2011, 93) emphasized in individualistic cultures and in one way can be seen as “form of verbal aggression”.

### **2.3 Challenges in communication process**

There is no need to say that communication process and its different traits are a crucial part of both individuals and to organizations communication. Organizational communication is now days regarded according to Jablin & Puttman (2001, in Huczynski & Buchanan 2007, 181) “a discipline in its own right, within its own research traditions”.

(Huczynski & Buchanan 2007, 183) mentions some of the main barriers effecting organizational communication. First mentioned is power differences where both bottom up top down communication between superiors and employees is distorted. Employees might distort the communicated information to the superiors and superiors sometimes have narrow understanding of what roles, problems and experience their employees have.

Secondly there is gender difference, the communication between women and men are different. Men tend to be more talkative in conversations where women are usually more reflective and listening. This might sometimes lead to misunderstandings. (Huczynski & Buchanan 2007, 183)

Thirdly, there is the physical surrounding where the space and layout of the room might influence our willingness to participate in conversation.

Fourthly, there is the question of language. Different people have different ways of communicating, which is influenced by their own culture and education. A country can for instance be divided in to different dialects that might make the understanding of others more difficult. (Huczynski & Buchanan 2007, 183.)

Lastly, there is cultural diversity; in every society and culture there are formal and informal expectations and norms that should be taken notice. Lack of knowledge and understanding of the culture might end up in misinterpretation of one another for instance an expatriate co-worker from Finland might have problems in understanding in co-workers in Spain. (Huczynski & Buchanan 2007, 183.)

## **2.4 International business communication**

One of the challenges that companies operating in various countries with multicultural environment among the staff are facing is the question of Intercultural communication. Intercultural business communication takes place in communication when there is more than one culture involved. Our own perception of the other culture can in these situations be misunderstood causing unintentional problems among the people. (Varner & Beamer 2011, 35.)



In today's world, we do not need to travel long distances and spend numerous hours in trains or aeroplanes. Thanks to technology communication can now days be done handled trough e-mail, Skype. Technology has made communication easier and faster, but has also brought forward new challenges in cross-cultural and intercultural communication.

Organizations might have intercultural training for its workers to work abroad or expatriates programs, but this does not guarantee that the person will gain the level of competence needed during the training itself as rare people are culturally intelligent from the beginning. The five steps for gaining and intercultural competency according to Varner and Beamer are:

1. Self-awareness of who you are and what culture come from
2. Understanding and accepting differences between cultures
3. Challenging the gained knowledge of learned culture to see our understanding as flexible and incomplete
4. Analyse the communication behaviour to reach conclusions what was good and what was not.
5. Enacting according with what has been learned

One way of tackling the international communication process can be trough schemata shown in fallowing figure.

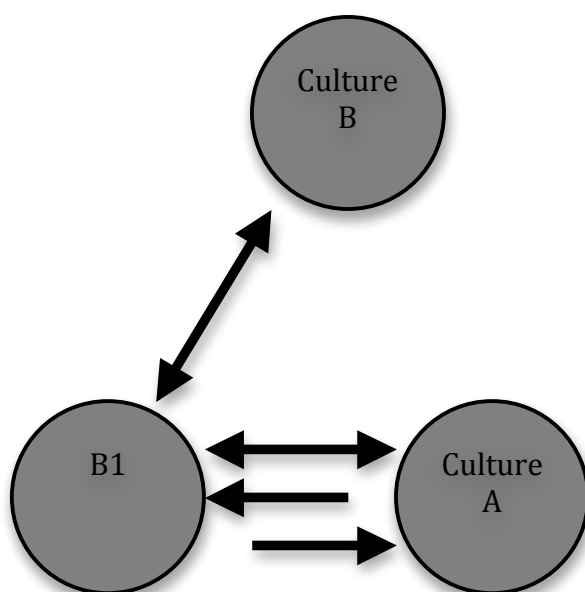


Figure 2. Model of a schema (Varner & Beamer 2011, 37)

In the figure culture A presents the culture where the person is coming from and the culture B the person that he is communicating with. The B1 is projection or schema of how the Person sees this persons culture B. The communication will be going trough this projection of what he has about this culture, but at the same time gaining possibly more information about culture B and so completing his projection to be closer and closer to the real culture. (Varner & Beamer 2011, 36-28.)

## 2.5 Cultural dimensions

Culture is complex thing and there are many ways to understand and define it. The important thing is to understand that a culture is something that is constantly developing, evolving and dynamic. There might be some dominant features in different cultures, but it does not mean that the population of that group would be the same nor that other opposite features would not exist among people.

Neulip (2009, 39) mentions five different cultural dimensions, which are: individualism-collectivism, high-low context, value orientation, power distance and uncertainty avoidance.

Individualism-collectivism might be the single most researched dimension of culture. In Individual culture the ruling feature according the studies is valuing own personal independence where as in collectivism the ruling feature is a sense of obligation to a group. So where as individual cultures people tend to put their self in front of the group in collectivism the group is put in front of an individual. In individual cultures people tend to emphasise their freedom choice, self-reliance and self-fulfilment. Where as in collectivism the group defines a person. The people in individual culture tend to have more groups than the people in collective cultures also the emotional attachment to a certain group in individual cultures is not based emotional attachment, but to self-worth. (Neulip 2009, 39-42.)

In high- and Low-context dimension the way people from different cultures communicate is divided. Where in Low-context cultures the use of direct verbal

communication is emphasised and silent in example in considered as awkward and negative, in high-context cultures the verbal communication is more indirect and non-verbal movements and expression are taken more closely notice. The information is searched from physical, perceptual and sociorelational environment leaving out the specific verbal communication. Silence in high-context culture is the opposite of Low-context cultures; it can for instance mean common understanding between the parties. Unlike high-context culture where the need of speaking is limited, in Low-context cultures the need of speaking is much greater relating to feelings. Expressing yourself constantly is common. (Neulip 2009, 51-55.)

Value orientation dimension relates to situations where people from different cultural backgrounds come together. People from different cultures can have different set of values that usually might cause possible misunderstandings in their interaction with each other. Shalom Schwartz an Israeli psychologist argues that these values are beliefs and concepts that not only reflected to the way we understand the information, but how we respond to it. These values settings are ranked in order through our own individual relative importance for the matter. Understanding these differences and commonalities between cultural values can be strong asset if not even necessity in today's business world and in expatriates programs. (Neulip 2009, 57-61.)

A power distance relates to the inequality that exists and varies from culture to culture. Hofstede(1980, in Neulip 2009, 67) defines the power distance as followed: "the extent to which the less powerful member of institution and organization within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally". Countries can be divided into small and large power distances. In countries where the power distance is small the people are more ready to question their leaders and the managers are more willing to consult with their workers or peers about business or dispute situations. In countries where the power distance is greater the position of teacher, oldest son, fathers etc. are not to be questioned in hierarchy. In large power distance countries like India the acceptance of position by birth or wealth is approved where in small power distance countries such as Sweden the importance of your own work and possibility to climb the leadership ladder is base for your acceptance in a company. (Neulip 2009, 67-73.)

Uncertainty avoidance dimension in general relates to situations where people are faced with unknown person or situation that they have now previous experience about how react. The comfort that they usual feel is displaced with uncertainty and unpredictability that cannot resolve to anxiety and difficulties to communicate with other people. A classic case for this kind of situation can be in situations where people are faced with unknown culture. Uncertainty probably is a universal and initial feature of intercultural communication, but according to Gudykunst and Kim (1997, in Neulip 2007, 174) the tolerance and ambiguity for each persons level can still varies from culture to culture.

## **2.6 Cross-cultural adjustment and communication competence**

Referring to the communication process described in section 2.1 the problem with understanding the message of the receiver can relates to misunderstanding the message due to the perceptual filters or noise that might distort the meaning of the intended message. Cultural background, in many possibilities was mentioned to be one of possible sources for such problem. Cross-cultural communication focuses on these encounters with people from another cultures and investigates possibilities to avoid cultural noise that can lead to misunderstanding of one's intentions and meaning. (Maude 2011, 71.)

Language is important part of integration to another culture for any expatriate or a person working in a new country and culture. Successful communication among small groups is dependent usually on understanding variety of languages and common the jargon that group uses in communication as well as using them in ones own speech. Other noticeable thing that well construct, clear and grammatically correct sentences are according to small groups and foreigners most easy to understand. Informal language on the other hand causes problems as sentences are mostly leave unfinished and so open for possible misunderstandings. The possible success of a noise-free communication is in popular speech even if many smaller groups can find problematic. The easiest way to understand popular speech according to foreigners is to make short, clear, simple and grammatically correct sentences clearly pronunciation. (Maude 2011, 71-74.)

Exchanges of relationships in cross-cultural communication bring more meaning and complication for why people make an effort to establish relationship with people from possible completely different cultural backgrounds. Exchanges of relationships occur when an individual behaves in a ways that they calculate to benefit their own best interest. This kind of behaviour is natural and especially important in business life, where relationships with members from others cultures are seek in hopes for future benefits. Exchanges of relationship can be in theory describe as a point of view where individuals are not communicating with other individuals, but the with the market itself, as Griffin (1994, in Maude 2011, 73) points out that

“We live in a interpersonal, cross-cultural economy and constantly take stock of the relational value of other we meet.”

Encountering and establishing relationships with people from another culture may part be exchanges of relationship where we seek to benefit from it in the future. (Maude 2011,73.)

Another important factor in cross-cultural communication is linguistic ambiguity that relates to possible misunderstanding in cross-cultural exchanges. Interfering with the speaker in cross-cultural situations is much more problematic than in same-cultural communication. The understanding of knowledge, language skills as well as culture make it more easy for native-speakers to interfere with a speakers where as in cross-cultural conversation people might fail to understanding the statement due to their lack of understanding of language and culture and so to be ambiguous. A person again might also understand that the given statement in conversation is ambiguous, but still stay silent and blame his self for not understanding the context. (Maude 2011, 73-74.)

According to Ruben (1976, in Maude 2011,74) cross-cultural communication competence has several clear dimension that are: Showing respect to the other cultures members, not responding judgmentally toward member of another culture, giving possibility to everybody to talk in a conversation, having the empathy and understanding towards the background of the person from another culture. Eerdman (2003, in Maude 2011, 74) divides cross-cultural competencies to two different competencies that are linguistic and interactional, where lastly mentioned is acquired

through "interactive conventions and rhetorical strategies" (Maude 2011, 74) that people from other cultural groups use when communicating. Cross-cultural competence has closely related to different personality traits such as honesty, politeness.

Cross-cultural communication competence can be divided yet to conscious and unconscious competencies where conscious literally means trying to improve consciously the cross-cultural communication. The unconscious side that is described in figure 3. can be seen as state gained from conscious way of working, where a person automatically reacts to the situation at hand. It relies on the earlier mentioned theory of two competencies, linguistic and interactional skills forming the cross-cultural communication behaviour and leading in the end to the cross-cultural communication competence.

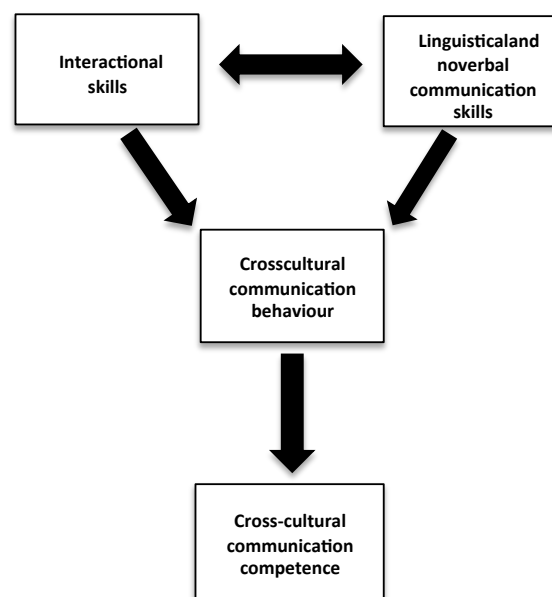


Figure 3. Cross-cultural communication competence (Maude 2011,75)

## 2.7 The roles of an expatriate

In this chapter the author will shortly go through the reasons why large multinational companies (MNCs) are keen to establish expatriate programs and some of the problems that sometimes lead to expatriate failures. The role of an expatriate can be summarised in short:

“ The role of an expatriate is to transfer the know-how, to control operations and to develop expertise in working in different countries.” (Branine 2011,12.)

There are increasing possibilities for people take on international assignment and so become expatriates living in a foreign country. The global economy, international merger, new market access and increasing competition are some of the factors why these opportunities have become available for both company managers as well other employees. Expatriate programs are not any more limited to large MNCs to implement as possibilities for foreign exchanges programs in schools and other institutions a like. Young people are more eager and willing to travel and live abroad than before thanks to overall development of technology such communication technology that able people to stay contact with their love ones trough long distances. (Guirdham 2011, 284.)

The challenges in expatriate programs whether being short or long time are the same. The inadequate training given by companies for preparation and poorly handled recruitment process where person’s personal competencies towards stressful situations and possible cultural shock are not given enough notice. (Guirdham 2011, 284.)

A good model for describing expatriates adjustment process is cross-cultural adjustment model preparation-and-interaction, that is based on the assumption that adjustment for another cultures depends on individual’s own needs and skills to communicate with people from local culture inline with cultures norms. Kim (1995, in Maude 2011, 178) cross-cultural theory supports this idea by dictating that expatriate commonly struggles in the beginning of his assignment to fit the local culture. The new situation can be stressful and expatriate might experience disorientation, yet in a longer time period experiencing these feelings can lead to new learning and growth both professionally and personality wise.

(Maude 2011,178.)

A more widely accepted adjustment approach is divided in three dimensions: “work adjustment, interaction adjustment and general living adjustment” (Maude 2011, 179). Adjustment for these three can vary depending on the persons personality and work, foe example expatriate managers might adjust easily to work as many are committed to

do their jobs as good as possible, but general living adjustment outside work might problematic. There have been researches indicating specific personal traits that make cross-cultural adjustment easier for persons to integrate locally. These qualities are toleration towards social and cultural isolation, free-minded approach for another culture and already mentioned communication competence. (Maude 2011,179.)

The following figure demonstrate the different common roles that an expatriate have during his journey:

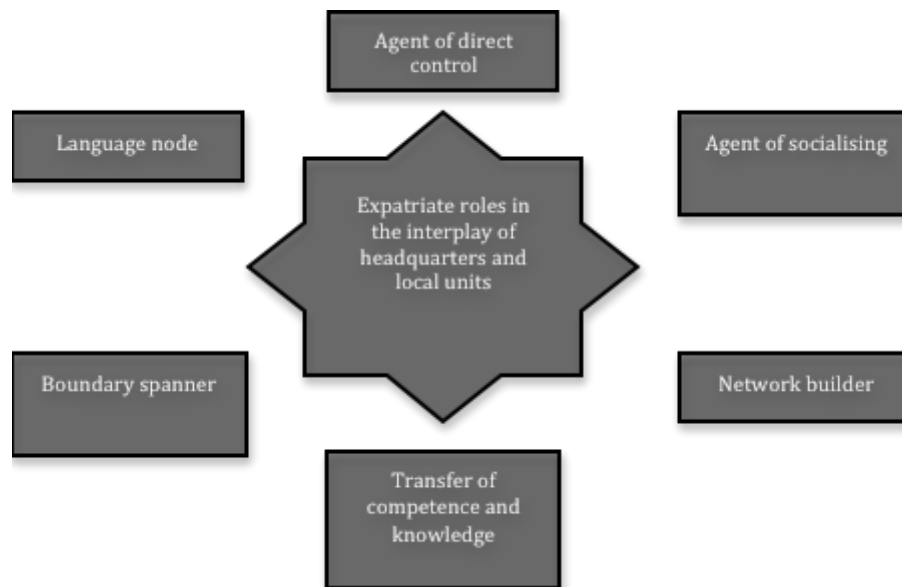


Figure 3. The Roles of expatriate (Dowling et al 2008, 92)

Expatriate program can be seen as control mechanism, where the purpose is to ensure compliance through supervision. The purpose of this kind of supervision is to enable strategic objectives set out by the company such as ensuring that the given assignment is well suited and offers challenges for the expatriate to learn and acquire new skills for long-term goals. (Dowling et al 2008, 93.)

Many times the role of an expatriate is related to sharing of company values, believes to solidify them. Yet the according to Fenwick et al (1999 in Dowling et al 2008, 93) effectiveness of this kind value sharing has not been measured empirically, and in subsidiary level some of the cases the purpose of value sharing has caused negative reaction when tried to apply. Knowledge sharing competence transfers are important part of International assignments. The adoption of different viewpoints and work practices are also possible and where as this can be harmful for the corporate culture it



might also increase the feeling of belonging for the employees themselves. (Dowling et al 2008, 93.)

Social network building is something that is usually mentioned when talking about expatriates, especially when talking about international assignments. However, Social network building is more person-dependent as people tend to sometimes be protective and selective about their own groups. In expatriate programs where the assignment is short-term from three to six months the challenge is even so greater as the time period for establishing connections is shorter on the other hand where the amount of connections might be lesser than in long-term assignments the variety of network can be bigger as the expatriate does not have so much to establish specific groups where to belong. (Dowling et al 2008, 94.)

Boundary spanners refer collection of internal and external information. Expatriates are not only representatives of their company in the foreign country, but also observers. An expatriate can at the same time gather information about their host-country and departments best practises, but also give their own donations to the local working culture by their own experiences from their own countries and departments best practises. (Dowling et al 2008, 94.)

Expatriate has also possibility to come language nodes if he acquires a good language skills and relationships in the host countries company. This can take place after return of the expatriate to his own country where he might be become the person to whom the country contacts when they enquire information. (Dowling et al 2008, 94.)

Earlier it was already mentioned that company has assumption and hopes that transfers of knowledge and competence between the host company and by expatriate will happen. Yet there are several factors that might affect the outcome of this change:

- How open and supportive is the environment of the host country
- How well supported is the expatriate by his home locations when he goes to the assignment and what kind of benefits an expatriate will gain from his assignment.

- Even as companies promote the importance of personal networks what comes to exchanges of knowledge and information there is rarely any strategic approach what comes to staffing in the light of effects that it might have to the network relationships.
- The time frame for different transfer might vary depending of the given assignments, some might be adapted quickly and some might take longer time.
- The motivation to act as in his role of an expatriate and skills for teaching other is dependent on the expatriate.
- There is a possibility that the expatriate will act mainly on a role of teaching skills to a local staff depending on its competences. In longer-term this kind of situation can lead to the decrease of the expatriates own competences as his not gaining anything himself. (Dowling et al 2008, 94-95).

## 2.8 Expatriate failure

Expatriate failure can be related to three different questions concerning definition, magnitude of the phenomenon and costs that are associated with the failure.

Generally the expatriate failure can be defined is as premature return of an expatriate. The narrowness of the definition in literature widely talked about as it does take notice on matters such as how well the expatriate has managed and adjust to his tasks in the given assignment, but considers that expatriate who may have succeeded poorly in his assignment, but stayed the full length of the it as a success. In this the expatriate failure will be used in its narrow definitions, as it was used during when the survey was conducted. (Dowling et al 2008, 112-113).

The magnitude of the expatriate failures according to Dowling et al 2008, 113) has been argued since R.L.Tungs article “Selection and Training of Personnel for Overseas Assignments” in 1981 started the discussion. Since than there has been wide conversation about how the expatriate failure should be defined and whether the term itself should cast a side and the problems drawn to general HR literature ”to analyse problems related to turnover and performance management in an expatriate context” Christensen & Harzing (2004, in Dowling et al 2008, 113).

The history of the expatriate failure can be derived from following reasons:

1. The definition of expatriate failure is warranted
2. However the term expatriate failure is or will be defined. It still demonstrates the complex issues relating to international assignments.
3. The expatriate failure rates are not completely inconclusive as the study methods and results have varied greatly.
4. The types of expatriate assignments, size of the companies and maturity of companies having such program are not differentiated.
5. The companies have possibly learned from their own mistakes or through benchmarking against other companies and so become more aware of problems relating to international human resources activities. (Dowling et al 2008, 114-115)

Lastly there are both direct and indirect costs that can be related to the expatriate failure. The direct costs include matters such as training the expatriate; relocation expenses, flight costs and depending on the position of the person sent the salary that is paid to him during the assignment and naturally the possible replacement person that might be sent to his place after the failure. Indirect costs again that are many times neglected by companies might end up being more costly for the company than the direct ones. These invisible costs relate to both relationships between the personnel and clients interacting with the expatriate that when failing can lead to losing business deals as well as decreased productivity and low morality in the assignment country. The expatriate himself might also suffer from low self-esteem, decreased work motivation and prestige among his working partners. The expatriate's family relationships might also be in the line in expatriate failure. (Dowling et al 2008, 115)

### 3. Case company IKEA Ltd.

IKEA Ltd is a multinational company that currently operates in 41 countries and has a staff of 131 000 representing over 48 different nationalities. In 2011 IKEA brand was one of the 41 known brands in the world (www.BusinessWeek.com). IKEA was also chosen to be the 20<sup>th</sup> most attractive employer in 12 of the world's largest economies in according to Universums recently published index of "The worlds most attractive employer 2011". (The World's Most Attractive Employers 2011,Universum, 2011)

Even though many businesses business have suffered due to the financial crises IKEA has successfully increased its sales growth in both 2010 and 2011. In financial year 2011 the total sales growth grew by 6.9% amounting the total revenue for 2011 to be 25.2 billion. IKEA also managed to grow its markets shares in all of its markets. It the recent years IKEA has invested large amount of money to sustainability in business and environmental responsibility with such partners as WWF and UNICEF. (Welcome inside 2011, IKEA, 2011, 1-6)

The structure of IKEA organization shown in figure 2 might be rather complex at first sight. The organisation structure is based on the idea of founders Ingvar Kamprad's of creating ownership structure and organisation that stands for independence and has a long-term approach.

IKEA brand is franchised by IKEA group trough Inter IKEA Systems B.V. that is the concept owner franchise. IKEA group pays yearly 3% of its sales to IKEA system B.V. The Stitching INGKA Foundation owns the Inga holdings B.V and its purpose is maintaining the ownership structure and organization to secure independency in a long-term. INGA Holding B.V. also funds the Stitching IKEA foundation charity such as children's rights in the world. The Stitching IMAS Foundation is responsible of managing the assets of Stitching IGKA Foundation. (IKEA,2011,21)

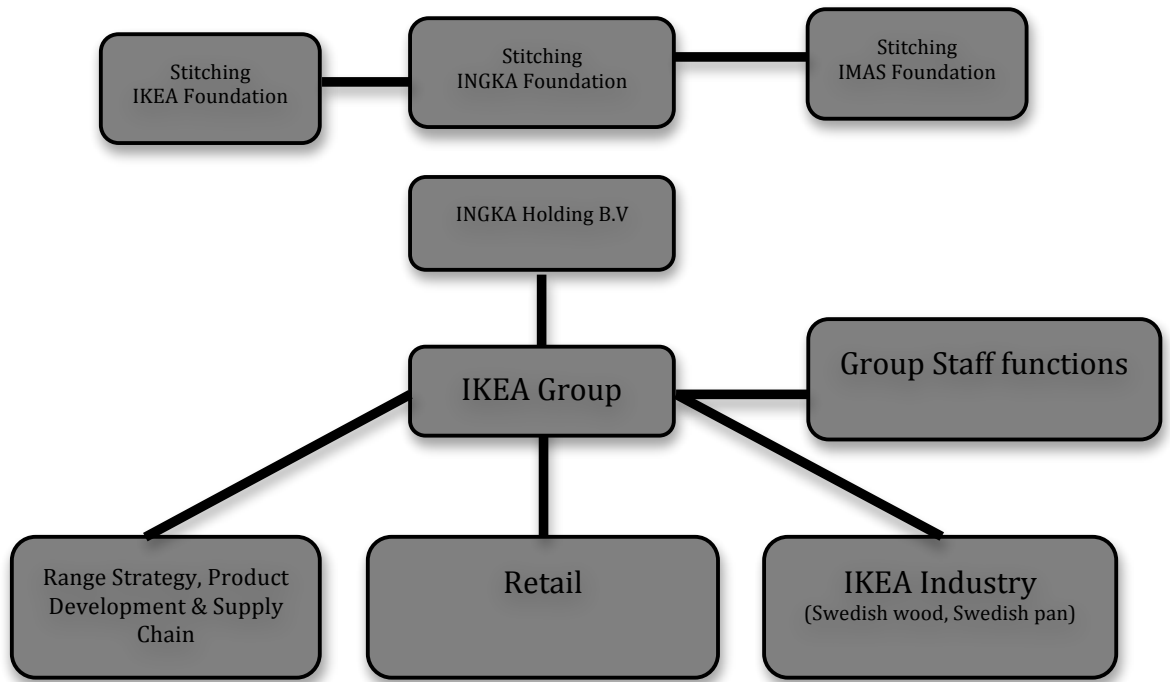


Figure 5. IKEA group organizational Charts

IKEA Group operates in four different areas of business: production, range strategy & product development, supply and retail. IKEA owns all of its functions retails, land areas as well as all of its 9,700 articles sold in all of the 287 stores cross the globe. Ownership of all of its functions and business can be argued to be one of the main factors in IKEA success. (IKEA, 2011, 21)

Everyone country where IKEA operates has its own Service Office where the organizational decisions are been made and distributed to the stores. Each store has its own ground office as well where the local store decisions and decisions from service Office are been made. IKEA has always considered it co-workers as its most valuable assets that can be seen both in the IKEA culture of working together as well investing in staff training for development and leadership.

### 3.1 The Backpacker Journey

The Backpacker Journey is a new program established by IKEA global hr. The purpose of the program is “ by transferring the new generation of successors in IKEA to other countries, co-workers grow and connect with the global scope of IKEA,

strengthening the company's development as well as their own" (IKEA GROUP human resources, Rules for Backpackers, 2010).

Journey is divided in to two six months work periods in different assignments in two different countries. In the beginning co-workers that had minimum of one year working experience could apply, but since then the program has become open to any co-worker interested to take on the backpacker journey. The first journey started in autumn 2010 with 50 backpackers chosen through recruitment process in spring 2010. The first assignment covered only IKEA stores around Europe, but now in 2012 covers 25 different countries globally with 88 backpackers currently taking the journey. The purpose of the Backpacker Journey is to offer opportunity for potential talents inside of IKEA to work abroad and so gain experiences and connect with other people as well as offer possible faster career procedure inside IKEA.

## 4. Data Collection

This thesis is research-based study. This chapter will introduce the reasons behind choosing collection methods and research approach. He will also cover issues concerning validity and reliability.

### 4.1 Research approach

This expatriate survey was conducted as a quantitative study. The reason for choosing quantitative research methodology was based on the information and time frame given by the IKEA global HR. The situation is in line with the opinion of Jankowicz (1991, in Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010, 104) where he argues that the purpose of the study with its research problem should be selected according what technique benefits it the most. The IKEA global HR was interested to receive information about the how different participant felt about the program after the first assignment was over and what kind of issues could be taken notice in a longer run, especially in communication. The quantitative method was chosen, since it is commonly used for measuring consumer behaviour, knowledge, opinion and attitudes (Cooper & Schindler, 2011. p. 161). Another reason for using quantitative methodology was because it is generally perceived as a deductive method to proceed from generalisations to more specific, where as the qualitative research visa versa. This approach has been criticized by Qureshi (1992, in Hirsijärvi&Hurme, 2008,25) to be wrong and that quantitative research might also go from specific to general, in cases where based on single results matters are lead to general conclusion. Another feature that is related to quantitative research is that it commonly starts from theory and hypothesise where as qualitative is considered to end in a hypothesis and ground theory. In this light validity of using quantitative research for the survey valid as the IKEA global HR had already made some hypothesis about subject bases on the feedback it had received from the participants.

Glesne & Peshinkin (1992, in Hirsijärvi&Hurme, 2008, 25) mention that in quantitative studies the purpose is to identify and measure variables as well compare them with each other where as in qualitative research it is assumed that variable are complex and are so hard to measure. Qualitative methods could have provided a good in depth analyse for the

research, through organized interviews with managers and backpackers of the Backpacker Journey. Unfortunately the lack of time that the author had for conducting the survey and high price that visiting different participants in different countries would have cost, was not inline with the research frames set by IKEA global HR, and as Ghauri & Grønhaug, (2010. P. 104) also argue the procedure itself is more vital questions than “quality” what comes to choosing between qualitative or quantitative methods.

The quantitative methodology was better suited for this study as it offered a structured, least time and money consuming way to research the matters at hand. The IKEA global HR along with the Talent manager had already received feedback about the backpacker journey and were keen to find out how much these feedbacks were true and what other matter could be done to improve the program before going global with it. The survey was divided in five parts. First part was reserved to common questions answered by all whereas the others were specified to certain groups that were following: backpackers, backpacker hosts, line managers, country backpacker responsible, and country HR units. The purpose of this was to receive information about relationships that different participants had towards each other as well as the possibility to compare these groups to the common responses received from everyone. Structured survey also was the easiest way to contact all of the participants as all of the answerers were spread all around Europe.

The theoretical frame of the survey was built after the results of the survey were collected and analysed. This is a challenging as “the user must select adequate theories and methods and adjust them to the actual problem, which is demanding task”(Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010 p. 34). The main reason for this was due to the tight schedule the author was given to make the whole survey at the time. The main themes relating to communications existed from the beginning and were made clearer with IKEA global HR Staff. The author was in constant contact with the both the Talents and communication responsible of the backpacker journey managers. The final version of the survey was moulded through numerous online meetings where the newest version of the survey was carefully gone through and discussed. The managers of IKEA mobility Support group did the final check up before the final version was published in IKEA intranet and set to the participants.



## **4.2 Data collection**

The author used descriptive survey form on the bases when structuring the questionnaire. This was a logical way to go as descriptive surveys are made to investigate certain phenomenon in a certain groups with its characteristic in certain time. (Ghauri&Grønhaug, 2010,19). The existing survey tool was chosen for collecting of the data, as it was the fastest way to reach of the participants around Europe. A preliminary letter with request to answer the questionnaire was send week before the actual letter with the link to the IKEA intranet survey. In case of possible problems with the program, questions and other feedback both of the authors and the program leaders e-mails addresses were given in the letters.

The data collection was done in one month's period during author's internship. The actual questionnaire was first written as a excel version, but later built with a tool existing already inside of IKEA intra. There were both positive and negative issues with the survey tool. First of all the questionnaire results were fairly easy to handle as well as analyse, as the answers were possible to turn directly in to graphics also most of the participants had the access to IKEA intranet during their work. The negative sides were that as the tool itself was old and inflexible changes were not easy to make later on. There were situations were some of the question positions were changed without noticed, which caused extra work. The old survey tool made it also impossible to divide the survey in parts, where specific group could only see questions specified to them and none of the other parts directed to other participants. This meant that the survey was in the end sent as whole and all of participants were able to see questions made for others respondents.

## **4.3 Reliability and validity**

There are circumstances that need to be taken into consideration relating to the survey that might have an effect the respondents and thus the reliability and validity of the research. First of all the respondents might be suspicious if the company or the leader of a program are managing the survey themselves, this might lead to a situation where a respondents might either answer the survey untruthfully or not answer at all. A good

cover letter explaining clearly why such survey is being made can have a major impact on the responses and dissolve any suspicions. Secondly the way that the questionnaire is presented for the respondents can also affect the respondents, for example over emphasizing how important is to get good results from the survey or promising an expensive gift can lead the respondents to lie about different matters.

Naturally the questionnaire format and the time that it will take to answer it can have affect on the respondents as nobody wants to respond to a survey that looks awful and takes hours to answer. Thirdly, one should make to ensure that the sending of the survey is easy and does take any efforts to do after answering.

(Ghauri&Grønhaug, 2010,118-119)

One way to ensure reliability and validity is by focusing in building a clear designing for the survey. There are several guidelines that can improve the quality of your survey and so ensure better validity and reliability.

1. The structure must take notice the respondents background and language skills to make sure that the structure as well as the questions are clearly and understandable for everyone. Simple writing is recommended.
2. The questionnaire should not have any unrealistic demands when it comes to the answerer's know-how, memory and willingness to respond.
3. Questions should cover one thing at the time. Having double question relating to another matter on the side makes it difficult to respondent to give his "right" opinion on the matter at hand.
4. There should not be any escape route in the questions that an answerer can take. This means that the multiple choice questions there should not have an option of "don't know " or neutral".
5. The questions should be specific enough to interpret and categorize the answers easily. One way can be having general questions from where to specify the matter in interest.
6. Question should be neutral and suggestive towards the answerer.
7. The form of the questions should not be provocative. It is important to use language that does not feed offend nor provoke the answerer.

8. The question should straightforward and clear without any possible double meanings. This ensures that the answerer in the first place answers the questions, but also that later on when receiving the possible results of the questionnaire will not feel misunderstood.
9. The question in the survey should be place in a logical order, having specific questions first before general can affect the answerer not willing the questionnaire.
10. The overall layout of the questionnaire should attractive for people to ready to answer it also matters that should be taken notice is time that it takes to answer the whole questionnaire and complexity of the questions.
11. Lastly, it is important that the questionnaire is tested or overviewed by other people to get preliminary information and suggestions to improve the survey to be even better. (Ghauri&Grønhaug (2010,123-125)

Other things that could affect the reliability and validity of the survey would be the participants' own personal interest by writing in matter of achieving personal gain. This was taken notice by making the questionnaire free of any personal information with the exception sex and age, that were seen more of a way to divide some of the answerers in certain general groups also any data of possible tracing of the answerer computer of user name were taken account as the survey itself was made public in the intranet by a link.

Lastly, the authors own personal interest might also affect the reliability and validity of the survey. However, at the time when the survey was done, the author was in the middle of his internship in IKEA. He had not work in the company previously nor had any information about the program before he was assigned for making the survey. The author also worked closely with both the Talent manager and the programs communication who both went trough the materials and revised the survey the form until it was published also the last version of the survey was circulated trough local IKEA recruitment manager as well as manager of the IKEA Mobility Support to get possible correction comment for the survey before final version was sent to the participants.

## 5. Results

In this chapter the author will present the results of the survey. He will also mention possible problems that came about when conducting survey and how these problems could have been avoided. The previously mentioned purpose of the study was to get clearer picture of how the information about the backpacker journey is communicated among different parties participating in the program. Second goal was to understand the cultural challenges that might have occurred during the journey among the backpackers that affected their work. The overall answering rate for the survey was 31%, which meant that out of 400 participants for who the survey was sent 124 people respondent. The answering rate can be seen valid as it covered one third of the whole sample size, thus making the whole research valuable to IKEA Global HR. The author used the same survey tool to transform the collected data into excel-charts and graphs representing the numerous answers. The graphs collected from the survey will be presented in attachment in the end of the thesis as author felt that there were too many graphics to be build-in into the actual text

In the common the following issues were taken notice. Firstly, there was the time frame of the whole program and how it was executed. Secondly, communication as many felt that they received inefficient information about the program and their role in it. Thirdly, and what can be seen as result from other two already mentioned the clear need for development and directions of the program. The author will now separate answers in three main criticized areas: Time frame, development plan and communication, which he will separately go trough.

### 5.1 Time Frame

Many of the results and opinion give related to the matter of time. The recruitment process for instance was felt to be too short. This did not come as a great surprise for the IKEA HR as it had already received feedback about the matter, yet surprisingly it became clear that the actual process of the recruitment was not seen as the problem, but the short period time that people had the both opportunity to apply to the program to the point where the selected participants were already send to the first journey.

The short time period that the whole Backpacker Journey program was started resulted in situations where the assignments for the backpacker were not completely ready.

There were also some unexpected situations where The Backpacker guide did not give a clear answer, thus giving space for different conflict situations and misunderstanding of the roles for the Line manager, backpacker hosts and country backpacker host.

## **5.2 Development plan**

The most criticized area of the survey was the development plan that backpackers had to have during their journey. Many backpackers felt that their assignments in the given place did not match their own expectations and were somewhat lacking any structure. There were also many backpackers that did not have their assignments ready when first arriving to their new location, and were later put together with the help of backpacker host. Most of the backpacker's still evaluated their own success in the assignments relatively high, which was also in line with backpacker hosts opinions when they were ask evaluated the backpackers success in the assignment.

Backpacker hosts felt that they would have needed both more support from the line managers in designing the assignment for the backpacker and generally more communication in designing the development plan for the backpackers. This might have also been one of the reasons that some of the backpackers hosts felt that their role in the program was unclear and more than they had prepared to do in the beginning. Legal issues especially were mentioned to cause problems as well as issues concerning the housing of backpackers also the questions of to whom to contact and who made the final call caused problems. The lack of communication with line manager was also shared among the backpackers, as some of them had never heard from their own line manager.

The Line managers answering rate in comparison to other was modest to say the least. The communication between backpacker host evaluated in all to be average modest where as the communication directly with the backpackers was evaluated by the line managers to be really good which did not respond completely with the backpackers own evaluation with the Line managers.

The country backpacker responsible in general felt that the amount of work dealing with legal issues, housing and other matters with the given time frame and already existing work load affected greatly the quality of their work. Yet there was a lot of appreciation towards the talent managers for helping with program.

Backpacker adjustment to the local culture and the language skills were seen both in positive in negative light. The common IKEA working culture helped many backpackers to adjust easily to work in the host country. Those who had efficient language skills in English and had their assignment in a country where English used in everyday life have fairly easier time to adjust to the culture wherein backpacker that did not have the sufficient language skills in English or who were working in a country where English was not primary used have much more difficulties in adjusting and getting to know other co-workers. The poor language skills in English or in the countries mother tongue also affected the possibility of more complex assignments to be handed in for the backpacker.

#### **5.4 Communication**

One respondent stated that“ the importance and purpose of this program has to be clearer for the whole organization, something that I think will take some time. Until then I think we as Responsible play an important role, but we are much helped of having a clearer purpose, guidelines and other information from global”.

Communications and the already time frame were the two main problems that the survey brought forward. The survey clearly showed that the communication between all of the parties should be strongly re-enforced. All of the parties in the program felt little bit unclear about the whole purpose of the program and where it could lead them. The Backpacker Journey guide that was given to all of the participants was felt to be unclear and lacking information concerning the purpose and responsibility of different managers concerning matters such as housing and legal issues. The information in general concerning the program seemed to be quit narrow among the various retailers and co-workers.

The lack of communication between managers resulted in the problems with development plans. The backpackers themselves had misunderstanding of the assignment that some occasions resulted in tension between the backpacker host and the backpacker. There was an overall wish to have clearer and open communication between managers and with backpackers to make the development plan for the backpackers clearer. The Backpacker Journey guidebook was also wished to have improvements concerning areas of responsibilities and even more specified guidelines for manager and backpacker in possible problem situations.

## **5.5 Cultural aspects**

The questions relating cultural aspects were purposely left to cover smaller area. The IKEA mobility was responsible what came to offering the backpackers packages for their travels. The survival kit included: backpack, lonely planet guidebook of the country, language CD, Backpacker rulebook of the country's official language and European travel insurance card. The backpackers in general felt that everything in the survival kit was helpful for them with the exception of the language CD, which was in generally thought to be bad. There was also some ideas coming from the country backpackers responsible of MOBILITY taking a bigger role in what came legal issues concerning countries especially now that the programs was to become public.

There were both positive and negative matters that backpacker experienced during their journey. Language. Especially language was a matter that stood out from the responses whereas English, which is the official corporate language inside IKEA, made it easy for some to integrate with other employees. In countries where English is not the mother tongue this however caused problems for the backpackers to integrate as the locals employees' language skills were lower, this was also a problem for backpacker coming from a country where English is not speaking commonly to country where it used in everyday life. According to Dowling, Festing and Allen language might not be usually connected to cross cultural abilities, but in case of being a corporate language it can be a selection barrier in the recruitment. The evaluation of the language had been part of the recruitment project from the beginning. The evaluation of the language skills was made by the backpacker's original country's HR department and line manager that shared different view of the language skills required

for the journey than possible host country. The backpacker also wished to get more support from line manager as well as the local HR. Other matter helping backpackers to integrate with the local culture was the similarities between countries culturally as well as the common IKEA culture. Backpacker also considered their own personal competencies and location in the host country to have helped them in adjusting. The challenges that backpackers experienced was a lack of social life and challenges in new environment as well as accommodation that from the beginning arose emotions as the recommendation was for the backpacker stay inside of a family rather than having own apartment to live.



## **6. Discussion**

In this chapter the author will discuss the findings of the survey in the light of theoretical framework introduced in chapter 2. He will also give general improvement suggestions for the backpacker journey. Author would also like to mention that he was called to Sweden to present the analysed material for IKEA global HR after concluding the survey. Together with the talent and communication managers he was a part of meeting where a communication plan based on the results would be made to both manager and co-workers working in the backpacker journey.

### **6.1 Challenges in the communication process**

The backpacker survey indicated that there were some problems in the overall communication process that caused some confusion and information shortages among the participants. In the bottom up top down communication problem seemed to lean towards missing of the Line manager involvement. This lead to situations where backpackers were not always clear of their assignments and what were expected from them in the host country. The assignment for the backpacker was to be designed in cooperation with backpacker host and Line manager. In many occasion it seemed that the backpacker host did not get enough support from the line manager and was left together with the backpacker to plan the assignment. The line manager was also the direct manager for backpacker and so responsible for informing as wells as giving feedback about the assignment to the backpacker. In some answers backpackers had not even heard from their line managers after the recruitment process had ended.

The author also felt that the general information about the backpacker journey inside IKEA was lacking to some extend. In some of the responses backpackers told that co-worker that they were working with were unaware of the whole programs existence.

### **6.2 Cross-cultural adjustment and communication competence**

Another issue that came to attention of the author was the questions concerning the cultural challenges that expatriates were faced. The general adjustment theory proved

to be in line with many of the expatriate's experiences where adjustment for the working conditions was easy, but challenging what came to the social life outside of work. In the first case expatriates felt that especially the common IKEA working culture was one of the main factors for the adjustment in working conditions.

The importance of a common language mentioned in the cultural barriers as well cross-cultural adjustment and communication competence proved to be a crucial part of successful integration for many backpackers as well. The official corporate language in IKEA is English and it made it easy for many expatriates to get to know other co-workers and adjust to the local culture. Others that did not have fluent enough skills in English or in the local language however had problem with the integration and assignment that many felt to be not inline with their knowhow and skills.

These language problems originated from the recruitment process where the English language skills were measured by the local HR and not by outsourced language Test Company. The common understanding of sufficient spoken English varied depending on the country, for example the English skills that in Spain were considered to be sufficient whereas in Finland considered to be poor. IKEA had already made improvement in this area by offering language training for backpackers locally. Changes were also made to the future recruitment processes from which now on the language were to be evaluated according to standards language test set by IKEA global HR. The author considers this to have been right decision in the light of the results.

Author also remarked many backpackers' own personal competencies in adjusting to the local conditions. Those backpackers who had gone through the trouble of getting to know the countries cultures features and proactively trying to communicate with local co-workers were more easily able to adapted where as those backpackers who were more reluctant to do so and waited others to make contact with them, were left alone. This goes well with the idea of schema presented in chapter 2.2 were the reflection of different culture helps a person to understand the other culture thus coming to an closer understanding of the real culture of the country Cross-cultural communication competence can also be connected to these backpacker experience as it can be argued that by having both international skills and the competencies in verbal and non-verbal

communication allowed these backpacker to be conscious of the cross-cultural communication behaviour and act according to the local norms.

## **6.1 Development ideas and improvements in communication**

In this section author will give development ideas for the backpacker journey program in the light of the mentioned problems. He will generally point out some parts, but does not go in detail since he already analysed and added during the communication plan with IKEA global hr.

The issues concerning the communication was the first and for most important part of the whole backpacker journey survey. The author feels that for the backpackers journey program to be successful the communication between participants needs to be emphasized. The roles of each participant and their responsibilities need to be made clearer as well as the communication structure whom to contact in different situations. The line managers need to re-enforce themselves to act more actively with both backpacker and backpacker host.

The author recommended using direct channels like the IKEA intra net and local IKEA co-worker magazine for more active promotion of the backpacker journey program. He feels that in order for the program to be successful, it needs to be more promoted to the co-worker and stores. This can both activate more people with potential to take part in the recruitment process as well as give the program attention that it needs to motivate participants to work their best for the program. The author also feels that promoting Backpacker Journey program in the IKEA magazines made for customer should be taken in consideration for promotion purposes, for example many young students are nowadays interested in the possibilities to both work abroad and in various task. Indirect channels such as blogs and Facebook could also be used in promotion by quoting different experiences in magazines and intra or allowing people to ask questions directly from backpacker about their journey.

## **6.2 Cultural aspects and improvements**

The cultural aspects in the survey were given fairly little attention, however the author considers that the cultural aspects play a more critical role in the backpacker journey than given notice. In cross-cultural, international and expatriate theories the importance of training, language were emphasized to be crucial part for any expatriate assignment. Author considers that IKEA should consider organizing training for the backpacker before taken on the journey.

IKEA Mobility Support could be made responsible for the training, as it is already responsible for backpacker's survival kit and providing expertise in practical issues and operating as a link for managers and expatriates in the journey. IKEA Mobility Support should also be considered to have more active role in issues concerning legal matters for the reason mentioned in last chapter 5. The survival kit should also be revised concerning the language CD.

## **6.2 Recommendations were further study**

The author recommends that further study should be made for the later stage of the IKEA Backpacker Journey program. The issues about communication found through this survey could be the base for the study to see whether the improvements have affected the program and what kind challenges the global stage has brought to the program. The author also suggests that the matters concerning cultural aspects should be taken more in consideration as the intercultural communication has a great importance when it comes to expatriate failure and so succeeding in a global stage of the program.

The expatriate failure in this survey was used in a narrow terms, limiting it to cases where the expatriate returning home from his assignment prematurely. The author feels that the wider meaning of term should be used in the future research to better measure the Backpacker Journey program success and possible challenges. The wider use of the expatriate failure might lead to situations, where some of the backpackers appearing to be succeeding might turn out to failing. However problematic this can be for the program first, the author believes that tackling these issues in the first place will help to improve the quality of the Backpacker Journey in a longer terms.

### 6.3 Self-assessment

In this section the author will reflect the whole thesis process and his own personal development during it. He will also reflect some of the matters that could have been done better in the research itself. The whole experience of conducting the research and writing the thesis has been truly a great learning experience. The authors has gained a lot of experience and understanding on the importance of internal communication in global company, he also gained understanding on the challenges and possibilities that expatriate programs can hold for the companies.

The thesis process itself has been challenging in many ways. Building the theoretical framework around already done survey has been great challenge that the author hopes to have managed well. The data collection and analyse process has developed the authors ability to analyse the data more critically and come up with conclusion that he feels he has managed objectively.

The author is mostly satisfied with the end result of the research and the form how it was conducted. There were however some improvements that he feels should have done and make the results clearer structure and results. The program that the survey was made did not have the possibility to be separated in parts possible to view only by the asked participants. This meant that all of the respondents could see the questions made for others, which meant that some of the cross-compared information validity could be questioned in the answers. The information regarding who should answer what was shifted from top to bottom in the online version and even as this was mentioned in the introduction for the survey some respondents told in the feedback they had answered other parts as well. There were also people in the managerial position that have both roles of the backpacker host and line managers which made in some part confusing in terms of interpreting the results.

The importance of time management has become clearer during the both survey and thesis writing process. The actual time frame given for doing the survey was both challenging and rewarding. The author also considers the successful designed with out

theoretical background to be due to a well-designed time management, efficient support and feedback from the managers running the program.

The thesis time management has been more problematic as the original schedules have been hard to keep. The schedule set out in the autumn of 2010 was postponed until the spring of 2012. The author still believes that the whole process of creating the survey and writing the thesis about the expatriate program has not gone to waste and will benefit the author later on his career. He has learned a lot about working in a multinational company, organizational communication and international aspects that it holds. The possibility of working in such environment would interest greatly and if given chance he would probably seize the opportunity.

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# Appendix 1. The backpacker survey

## **Introduction to the survey**

The purpose of the backpacker Survey is that we want to know how you feel about a number of areas that are especially important to developing you and your workplace.

The questionnaire is divided into different parts. You are asked to answer both common questions and questions concerning your own role or roles in the backpacker journey. You can find the question concerning you by checking the headings of the pages.

Some of the questions will have a scale from one to five, one being the worst and five being the best.

Be part of making the backpacker journey a better program. Just click complete the questionnaire by clicking below.

1. Gender

Male	Female
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Age

2. Your role in the journey  
(Backpacker, Backpacker host etc.)

3. Evaluate the following factors according to your experience

Information given about the backpacker journey	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
The recruitment process	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Time frame given for the whole process	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Clear Development plan & direction	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

4. Any suggestion for improvements regarding questions asked in number 4?

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5. Evaluate your own performance during the first assignment?

**1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**

6. Have you received enough information about the Backpacker journey and about your role in it?

**1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**

### Questions for the backpacker

1. How has your journey been so far?

**1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

2. How easy was it to integrate locally with:

a) Local culture                    **1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

b) Company culture (IKEA store)                    **1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

3. Referring the question 2, what things did you find challenging?

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4. Referring the question 2, what things made it easy to adapt?

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5. Evaluate the communication, dialogue and feedback with:

a) The Backpacker Host                    **1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

b) The Line Manager                    **1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

C) Local / unit Human Resource                    **1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

D) The Country Backpacker Responsible                    **1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

6. Have you received continuous information feedback from your backpacker host ?

YES	NO

7. Referring to the question 6, has the feedback been shared with your line manager?

YES	NO

8. Evaluate your level of english?

**1                      2                      3                      4                      5**

9. Was there an actual development plan before your journey began?

YES	NO

10. Did you have an introduction meeting with your host in distance prior to the first assignment was taken on?

a)

YES	NO

b) I was happy with the outcome?

**1                      2                      3                      4                      5**

11. Evaluate the following things:

The survival kit - in general	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Housing arrangements	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

12. Evaluate the following parts of the survival kit:

Backpacker rules	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Language CD	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Backpack	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Lonely Planet Guidebook	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

Information about the European Health insurance Card and IF Business Travel Insurance

**1                      2                      3                      4                      5**

13. Referring to the question 10, any suggestion for improving the survival kit?

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14. Evaluate the support that you received from Mobility?

**1            2            3            4            5**

15. After the first assignment, I feel confident about the development that backpacker journey will provide you?

**1            2            3            4            5**

16. Did the assignment responded with your development need?

YES	NO

17. Evaluate your assignment quality and context?

**1            2            3            4            5**

18. How well was the assignment discussed with your line manager in the beginning of your journey ?

**1            2            3            4            5**

19. Any additional comments, feedback that you would like to share with us?

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**Backpacker host**

1. Evaluate the communication, dialogue and feedback with:

a) Backpacker

**1            2            3            4            5**

b) Line Manager

**1            2            3            4            5**

D) Country / unit HR

**1            2            3            4            5**

F) County backpacker responsible

**1            2            3            4            5**

2. Evaluate the performance of the Backpacker according the assignment given to him

**1            2            3            4            5**

3. In my opinion The assignment has been a good match with development plan?

**1            2            3            4            5**

4. Referring to questions 2 and 3 what things were done well? What things that could have done?

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5. My role as backpacker host developed me?

**1            2            3            4            5**

6. What kind of challenges have you faced being as backpacker host?

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7. Evaluate the Backpackers' level of english?

**1            2            3            4            5**

8. How challenging has it been for you as a backpacker host?

**1            2            3            4            5**

10. My role as backpacker host has been clear?

**1            2            3            4            5**

17. Any additional comments, feedback that you would like to share with us?

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**Questions for the line manager**

1. Has the assignment been a good match with the Backpacker development plan?

YES	NO

2. The evaluation has been in line with the directions of the Backpackers development plan?

**1            2            3            4            5**

3. Evaluate the communication, dialogue and feedback with:

a) The Backpacker host

**1            2            3            4            5**

b) Local HR

**1            2            3            4            5**

C) Backpacker

**1            2            3            4            5**

D) Country Backpacker responsible

**1            2            3            4            5**

4. Does the Backpacker journey adds value to the participants development in a longer run?

**1            2            3            4            5**

5. The Backpacker journey support the participants development in the long run.

**1            2            3            4            5**

6. Any additional comments, feedback that you would like to share with us?

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**Questions for Country Backpacker responsible**

1. Has the assignment been a good match with the Backpacker development plan?

YES	NO

2. The evaluation has been inline with the direction of the backpackers development plan?

**1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

3. Evaluate the communication, dialogue and feedback with:

a) Backpacker host

**1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

b) Local HR

**1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

c) Backpacker

**1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

d) Contry Backpacker responsible

**1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

4. The Backpacker journey adds value to the participants development?

**1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

5. The Backpacker journey supports the participants development?

**1                    2                    3                    4                    5**

6. Any additional comments feedback that you would like to share with us?

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1) Evaluate the communication, dialogue and feedback with:

a) Backpacker

**1                    2                    3                    4                    5**



- b) Line Manager
  - 1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**
- d) Contry HR
  - 1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**
- c) Local HR
  - 1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**
- e) Backpacker host
  - 1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**
- f) Global mobility support
  - 1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**
- g) Staff human resources
  - 1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**
- h) Other country Backpacker responsible
  - 1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**

2. Has there been enough guidelines? 

YES	NO

3. Have the guidelines been clear enough? 

YES	NO

4. Referring to questions 2 & 3 what positive things have you found, what could be improved with the guidelines?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5 .Do you think that the timing of the backpacker program has been right? 

YES	NO

6. Have you receive enough support from group staff HR

**1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**

7. I get enough support from  
Organizations that I'm working with

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

8. How much time you have to spend in your role  
as Country backpacker responsible?

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9. Evaluate the support that you  
received from Mobility?

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10. Any additional comments,  
feedback that you would like us to  
know about?

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**Questions for the co-workers who applied, but were not selected**

1. Did you received feedback  
Regarding your application from  
backpacker journey

YES	NO
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2. Would you consider to  
applying again for the  
program

YES	NO
-----	----

3. Has there been any clear steps for  
future or any actions taken since your  
application to the journey?

YES	NO
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4. Referring to question 3, if there has been actions as taken;  
what have they been?

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5. Any additional comments,  
feedback that you would like to share  
with us?

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**Questions for local HR**

1. Evaluate the communication, dialogue and  
feedback with:

a) Backpacker	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
b) Line Manager	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
d) Local HR	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
e) Backpacker host	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

2. Referring to the question 1 what things have  
been good, what things could be improved?

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3. Any additional comments,  
feedback that you would like share  
with us ?

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**Questions for Country  
HR**

1. Evaluate the communication, dialogue and  
feedback with:

a) Backpacker	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
---------------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------

b) Line Manager	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
d) Country HR	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
e) Backpacker host	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

2. Referring to the question 1 what things could be have been good, what things could be improved

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3. Any additional comments, feedback that you would like to share with us?

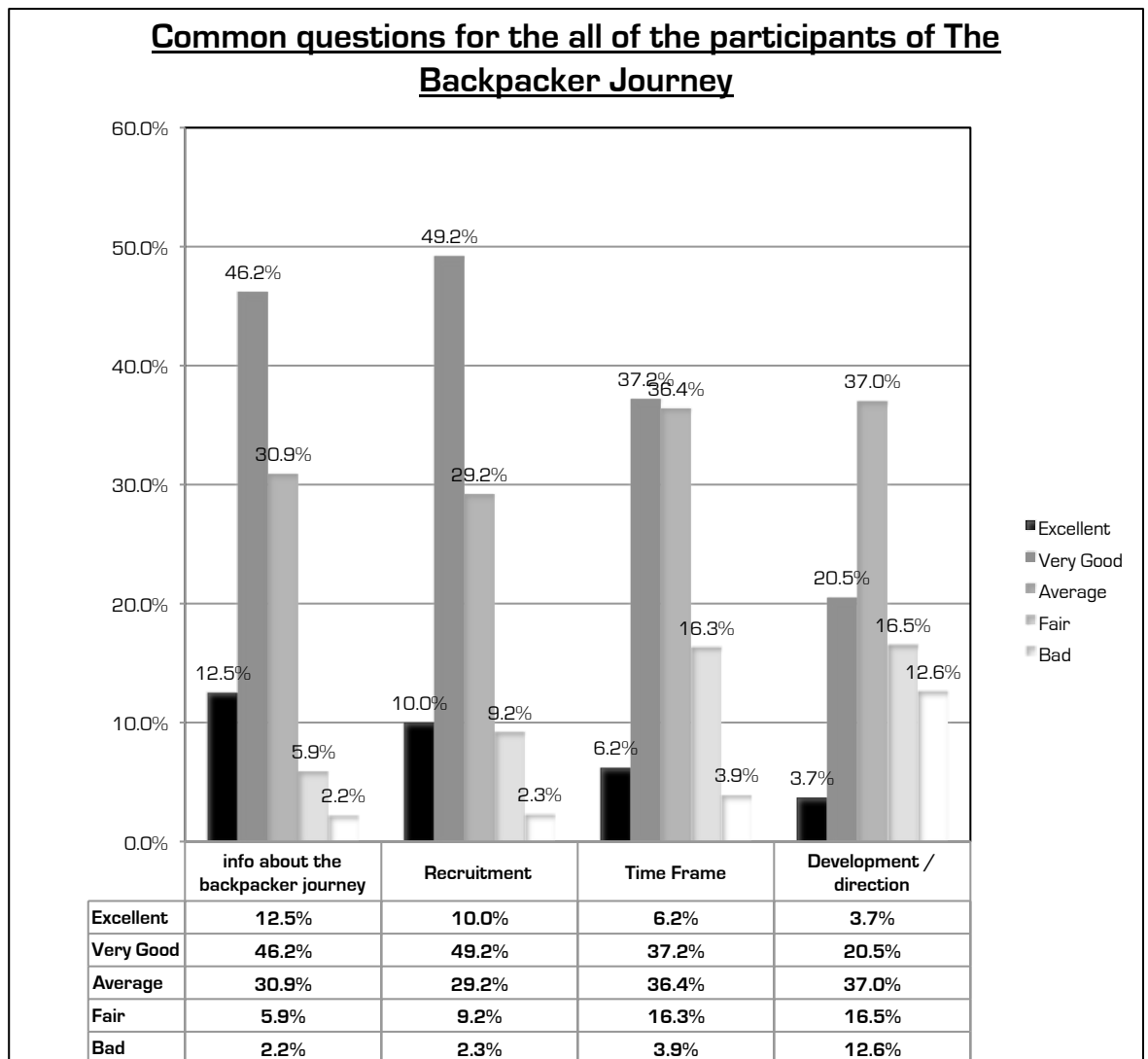
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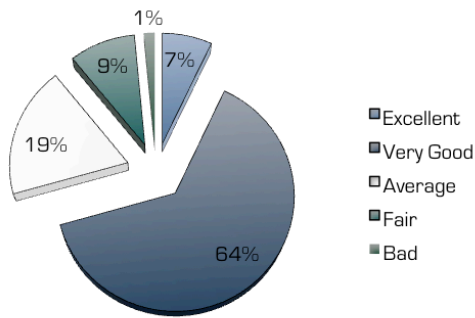
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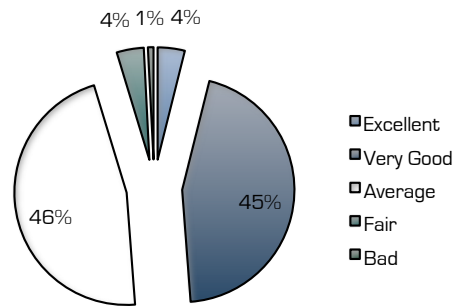
## Appendix 2. Statistics and graphs of the survey



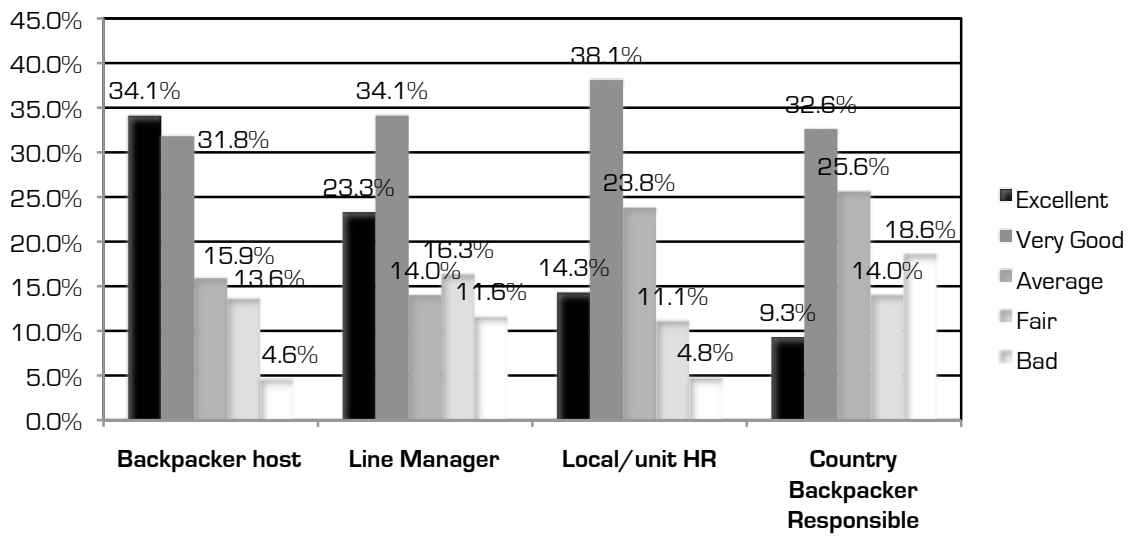
**Backpackers own opinion whether he has received enough information about the backpacker journey & his role in it**



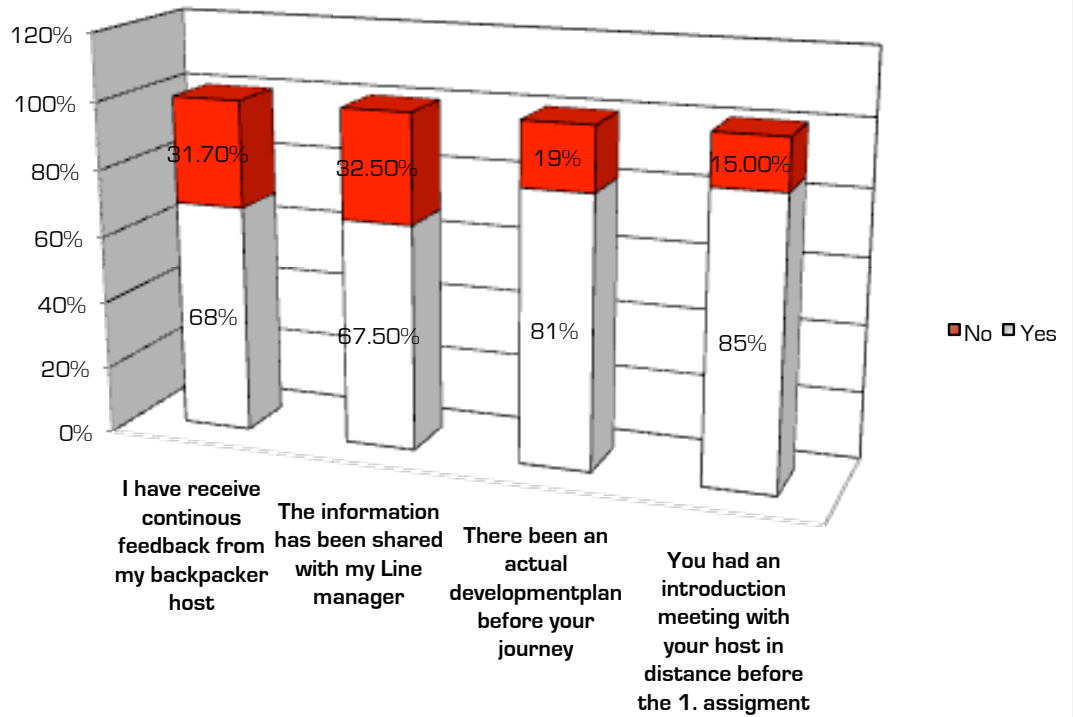
**Backpackers own evaluation of the first assignment**



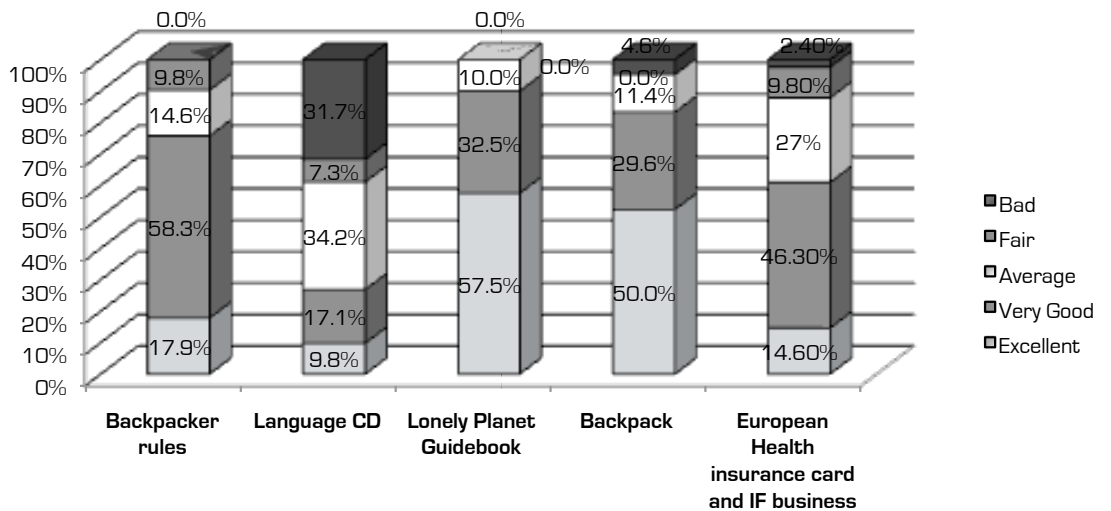
**Backpackers opinions about the communication with the different participants**



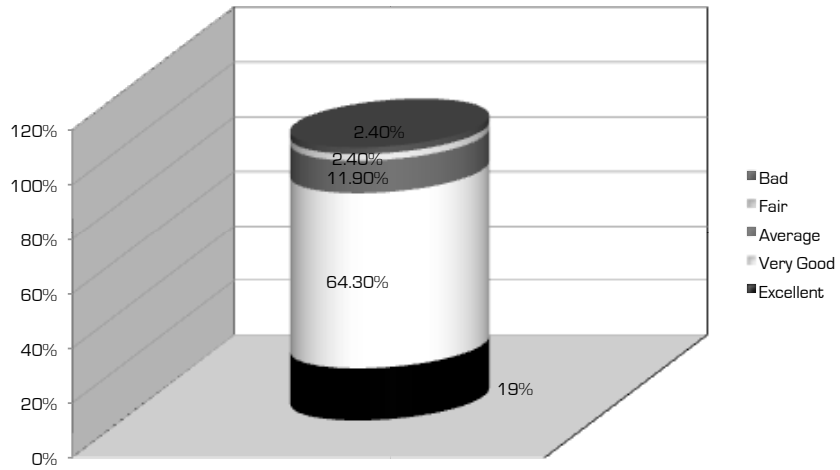
## Backpackers opinion about development plan, Backpacker host and Line Manager



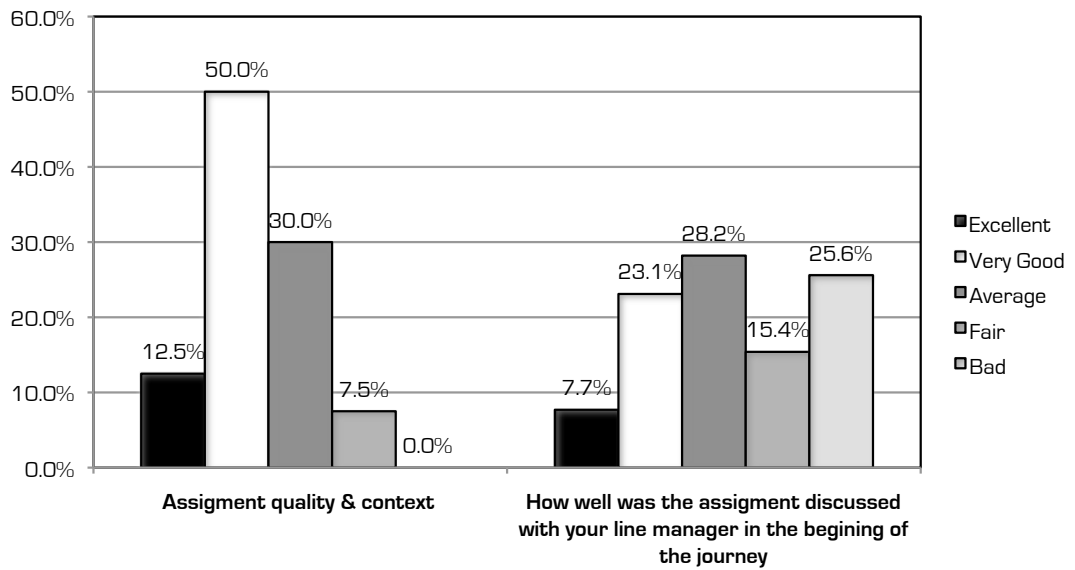
## Backpackers opinions about the survival kit



**How satisfy was the backpacker with the  
1. assignment**

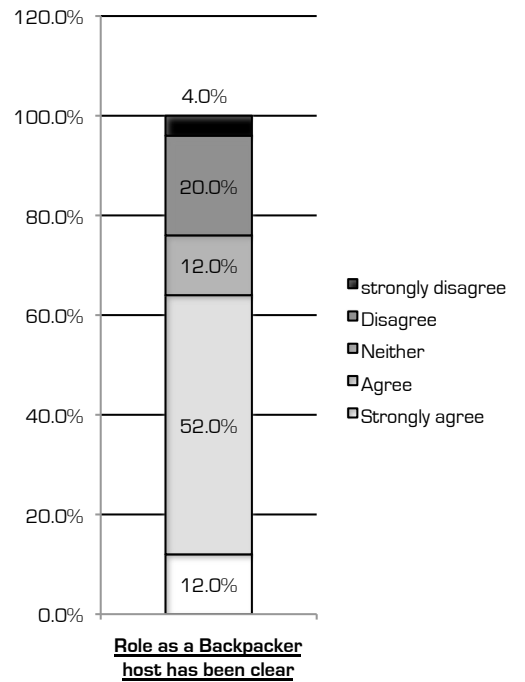
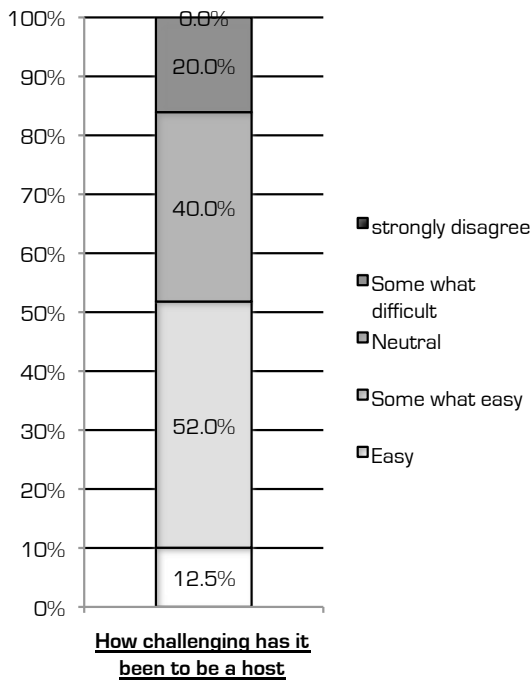
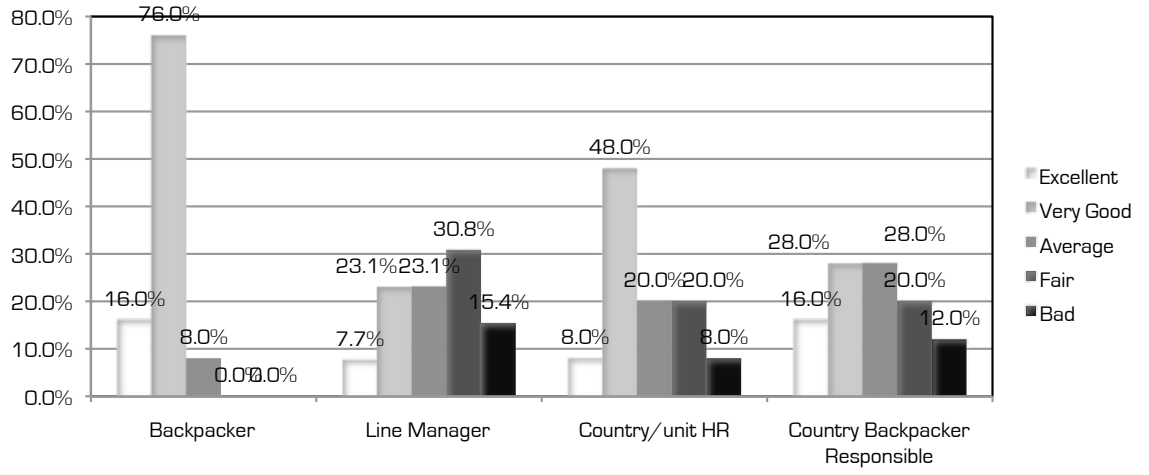


**Backpackers opinion about the Assignment and  
Communication with the Line manager**

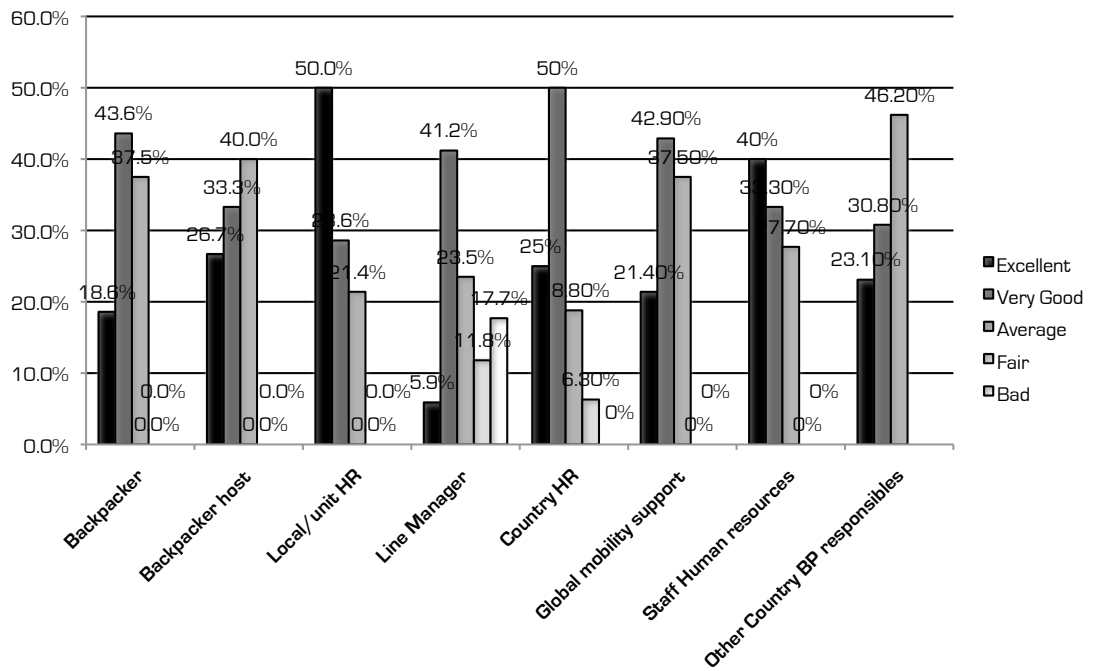




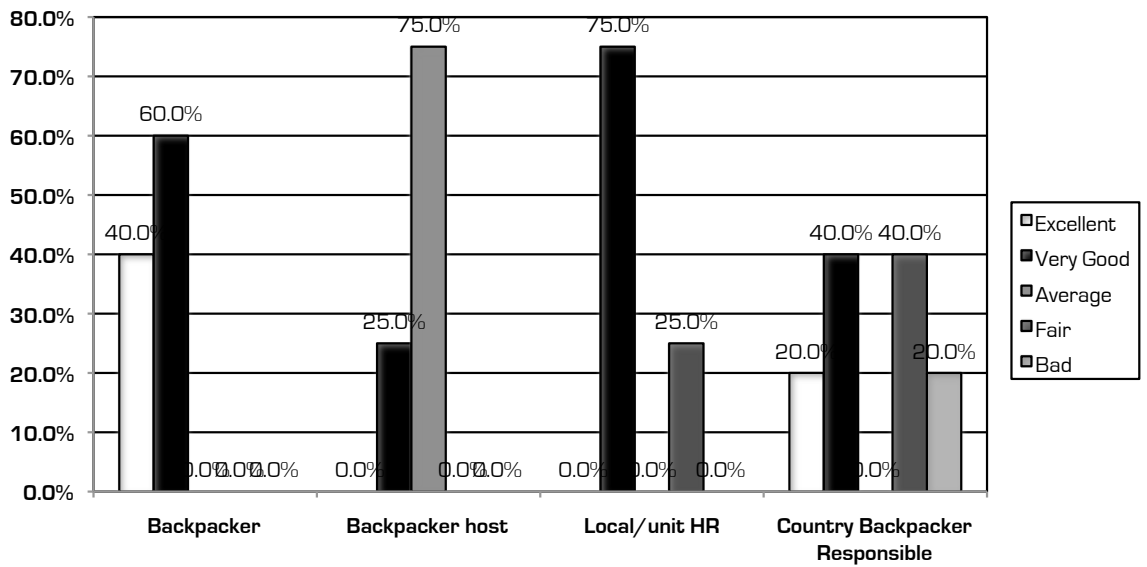
## Backpacker Hosts opinion of the communication with other participants



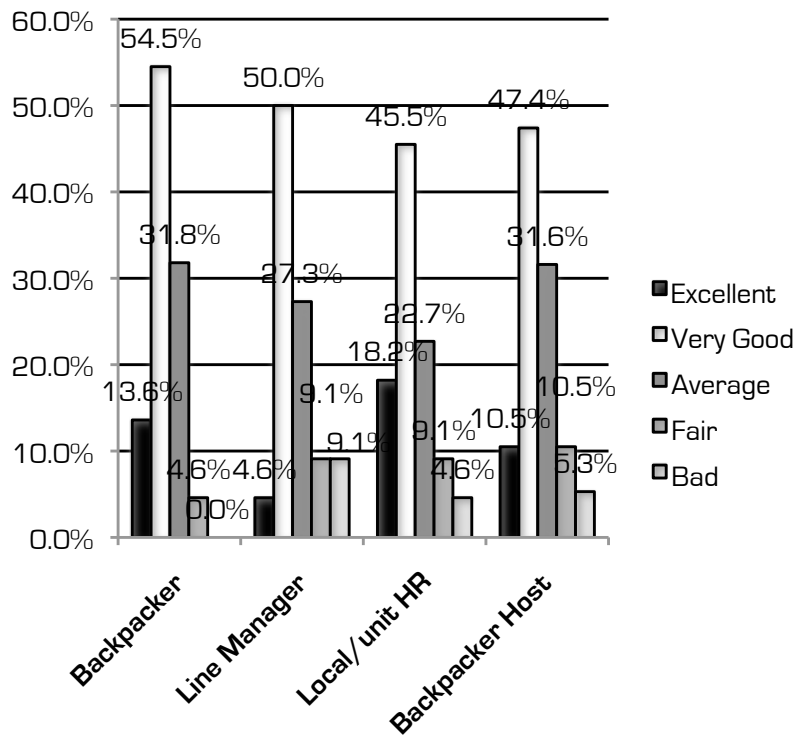
**County Backpacker Responsibles opinion about the communication with the other participants**



**Line Managers opinion about the communication with the other participants**



## Country HR's opinion about the communication between different participants.



## Local HR's opinion about the communication between different participants

