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Unlocking inhibitors to women's expatriate careers: can job-related training provide a key?

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Unlocking inhibitors to women's expatriate careers: can job-related training provide a key?

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine what job-related training interventions female expatriates seek and can access in order to build necessary knowledge and skills to progress into further career-enhancing expatriate positions.

Design/methodology/approach

This study uses a cross-sectional qualitative research approach, drawing upon semi-structured interviews in respect of organisational training practice with 26 current female expatriates and nine Human Resource, International Assignments and Training Managers in two oil and gas exploration firms.

Findings

Budgets, time and travel restrictions, and competitive business pressures constrain on-the-job training provision for expatriates. Assignees require specific knowledge and skills ahead of appointment to subsequent expatriate positions. HR personnel believe training provides appropriate knowledge and capability development supporting women expatriates' career ambitions. Women assignees view training available within their current roles as insufficient or irrelevant to building human capital for future expatriate posts.

Research limitations/implications

Longitudinal research across a wider spectrum of industries is needed to help understand the effects of training interventions on women's access to future career-enhancing expatriation and senior management/leadership positions.

Practical implications

Organisations should ensure relevant technical skills training, clear responsibility for training provision, transparent and fair training allocation, positive communication regarding human capital outcomes, and an inclusive culture that promotes expatriate gender diversity.

Originality/value

Set within the framework of human capital theory, this study identifies the challenges that female expatriates experience when seeking relevant job-related training to further their expatriate careers. It identifies clear mismatches between the views of HR and female assignees in relation to the value of job-related training offered and women's access to it.

Article classification

Research paper

Keywords

Careers; expatriation; gender diversity; human capital; skills; training.

Introduction

Expatriate assignments can help prepare employees for more senior roles (De Vos and Dries, 2013) not only by providing opportunities for skills development but also through signalling that their future intentions at senior levels are to be taken seriously (Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Ramaswami *et al.*, 2016). Completing more than one expatriate assignment improves work-related competencies through learning how to deliver varied and multiple job responsibilities within an international and cross-cultural environment and through operating with high autonomy (Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007). Successful multiple assignment completion assists organisational advancement (Ramaswami *et al.*, 2016). Hence, the development of such valuable competencies can lead to expatriate commitment to the pursuit of future international roles (Suutari, 2003).

Some relocation consultancy reports provide client data on women's share of expatriate roles. Although these sources provide limited insight, women are reported to hold 25% of organisationally-assigned expatriate positions averaged across all industries (Brookfield GRS, 2016; Santa Fe Relocation, 2018). Averages can, however, disguise considerable variations. For example, in male-dominated industries such as minerals extraction only up to 15% of the expatriates deployed are female (Shortland, 2009). As women appear to be under-represented in expatriate roles, this suggests that employers are failing to benefit from potential talent in their global business operations; this is particularly relevant given women's widely reported assignment successes (Cole and McNulty, 2011; Harrison and Michailova, 2012; Varma *et al.*, 2006). In addition, women are potentially losing opportunities to develop their international competencies and improve their promotion prospects (Shortland, 2016).

The minerals extraction sector typically operates in remote and sometimes insecure locations, often in developing countries which have limited expatriate infrastructures (such as

housing and healthcare) (Cartus, 2018). Perceptions of safety and cultural attraction also affect willingness to go to emerging economies (de Eccher and Duarte, 2018), suggesting that expatriates might be deterred from accepting assignments in potentially unforgiving environments. Notwithstanding this, such locations can provide considerable career growth (Dickmann and Watson, 2017). The extractive industries sector therefore provides a helpful context in which to study women's progress in achieving expatriate positions. In addition, the knowledge, skills and experience that can be gained from expatriate postings in this industry generate perceived favourable career outcomes that are attractive to women (Shortland, 2016). Lessons learnt in the minerals extraction industry can thus help to increase expatriate gender diversity in this as well as other sectors as organisations pursue a wider global reach via entering newly-emerging economies.

A human capital perspective suggests that people are rewarded for their investment in undertaking expatriate assignments as this increases their knowledge, skills and experience which can be used to organisational advantage. Yet, one expatriate assignment may be insufficient to accrue sufficient human capital development to achieve desired promotion outcomes (Ramaswami *et al.*, 2016). This suggests that, if women wish to enhance their career prospects, they can helpfully do so via a series of expatriate assignments in challenging environments. However, this raises the issue of women having sufficient and appropriate skills, knowledge and experience to gain entry into an expatriate role and, having achieved this, developing sufficient of these human capital components to progress on to further expatriate positions.

Organisations operate in a knowledge economy and the development of a workforce's human capital is of strategic importance (McCracken *et al.*, 2017). Human capital theory predicts that as workers increase their skills and knowledge, their earnings, social and cultural interests increase and, for those who employ them, well-trained and educated workers bring

economic growth (Becker, 2009). This theory indicates that on-the-job training to assist in human capital development should be relevant to organisations wishing to increase women's share of organisationally-assigned expatriate roles which, in due course, can help to provide a foundation for women to achieve greater senior management representation. Using human capital development as its theoretical frame, this paper aims to assess which organisational job-related training interventions are available and can best assist women to gain the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to progress within - and enter further - expatriate positions. Its objectives are to analyse women expatriates' perceptions of their access to the organisational job-related training interventions made available through training policy and practice, and review the contribution of this organisational support in improving their human capital development through hearing current women assignees' voices. By also drawing upon the organisational voice of HR personnel, the research objectives enable insight into whether training is delivered as intended (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). Set within two firms in the oil and gas exploration sector, it addresses the following research questions:

1. What organisational job-related training interventions do female expatriates value in supporting their current and future expatriate participation and why?
2. What issues affect expatriates' access to organisational job-related training interventions and what are women assignees' perceptions concerning their access to such training?

Literature Review

Investment in skills and knowledge provides individuals with 'human capital', comprising knowledge, skills and abilities, and this generates productive capacity leading to the creation of wealth (Schultz, 1961). The skills and expertise that comprise human capital provide a source of innovation and creativity leading to organisational distinctiveness (Bontis *et al.*, 1999) and a unit-level resource (Ployhart and Moliterno, 2011). The provision of education

and training forms a basis for the development of human capital by enhancing people's knowledge, skills and abilities (Becker, 2009). Investment in on-the-job training develops employees' human capital and its deployment improves organisational performance (Hatch and Dyer, 2004).

Although organisations that offer training, educational development and work experience build employees' human capital (Steen and Welch, 2011), individuals hold this as a personal asset and can choose to deploy it to best effect for their own career growth (Welch *et al.*, 2009). Experience, as a component of human capital, provides a source of tacit knowledge; this is considered as intangible, difficult to codify and share with others (Haldin-Herrgard, 2000). Given the valuable nature of international managerial competence and its positive reputational contribution, individuals are likely to pursue more of the experiences that deliver it (Benito *et al.*, 2005). Indeed, expatriates report their experiences provide excellent learning and development (Suutari, 2003).

The highly individual nature of human capital with its focus on specialist expertise means that organisations will suffer capital losses (financial and/or opportunity cost) when highly competent employees are unavailable for necessary roles or leave their positions to join competitors (Steen and Welch, 2011). The concept of human capital as a means of framing the development of knowledge and experience has immense relevance to expatriates and their employing organisations. With its historical roots in economics, human capital theory can be used to consider the contribution that job-related training can make to individuals' knowledge and expertise which can be disseminated throughout their employing firms (Wang *et al.*, 2002). The following section explains the concept of human capital theory drawing upon Becker's (2009) work (originally published in 1964) considered as "one of the classics in economy" (Na, 2012, p.437).

Human capital theory

Human capital theory (Becker, 2009) posits that expenditure on education and training are investments in human capital with positive economic outcomes, raising firms' productivity and individuals' incomes. For example, the theory predicts that the incomes of those with a university/college education will exceed those without such educational investment even after offsetting the costs involved and adjusting for family background. Recent UK research (Britton *et al.*, 2020) indicates that 80% of those holding undergraduate degrees are financially better off over their working lives than their non-graduate counterparts. Becker (2009) also states that individuals who benefit from investment in training in the workplace will earn more than untrained individuals as a result of their increased human capital. On-the-job training (formal or informal) increases workers' future marginal productivity by providing a source of skills and experience; it also assists individuals to keep pace with changing technologies. Employee productivity increases through the improvement of existing skills and learning new ones. Becker (2009) does note that human capital outcomes differ for workforce minorities – for example, absolute income differentials are smaller for female than male graduates, potentially due to lower labour force participation. Recent UK research does indeed show that women graduates' lifetime earnings are lower than men's (Britton *et al.*, 2020). Periods out of the labour market for child rearing, for example, can lead to women being less able to acquire human capital of value to employers; this can disadvantage them in gaining senior workforce positions (Anker, 2001).

Becker (2009, p.40) defines “completely specific training” as “training that has no effect on the productivity of trainees that would be useful in other firms”. Human capital investment made by the employer is lost when specifically trained employees leave. Organisations investing in specific training for their workers will have to train others if trained individuals leave, requiring additional costs to bring replacement labour up to the same level of productivity as the departing personnel. Offering higher wages after training

reduces the likelihood of turnover. Thus, employees in receipt of specific training are likely to command higher salaries. Becker (2009, p.40) acknowledges that on-the-job training is usually not so “completely specific” that employees cannot command income for this knowledge elsewhere, rather it is likely to have some level of generality of benefit to other employers. However, he argues that if it is sufficiently “specific” to the firm providing it, this insulates that firm from the poaching of its employees by others and that specifically trained employees have less incentive to leave their firms.

Expatriates can be deployed for a variety of reasons. Edström and Galbraith’s (1977) seminal work (Caligiuri and Bonache, 2016) classifies these as: to fill positions, to gain management development, and to enact coordination and control strategies to achieve organisation development. Human capital thus underpins the purpose of expatriation. For example, assignees may hold the skills necessary to deliver objectives within positions that potentially could not be filled locally, be sent abroad by their firms to develop human capital for future managerial roles, and may hold organisational knowledge that can be used to control local operations and workforces. Although Romero (2002) notes that expatriates are highly skilled with unique expertise, local managers may also be well-qualified (Toh and DeNisi, 2005). Local employees can potentially also offer more - or more appropriate methods of - control to the international firm’s local subsidiary than expatriates, as local staff have greater familiarity with the host country business environment, culture and political systems. If expatriates demonstrate no clear human capital advantages over local employees, this can be de-motivational to the local workforce (Toh and DeNisi, 2005). If organisations wish to use expatriates for whatever purpose, human capital advantages in so-doing should be clear – and this highlights the importance both for firms - and the expatriates themselves - of training interventions to advance assignees’ skills, knowledge and experience.

Expatriate job-related training

The provision of job-related training is more commonly provided in the host location than in the home country prior to departure; nonetheless, expatriates report a gap between training received and that deemed necessary (Suutari and Burch, 2001). Expatriates point out various constraints that they face while on assignment which can preclude take-up of training interventions locally or abroad. These include the requirement to be seen actively conducting a leadership role. In addition, cognisant of their high cost to their employers, the expense of undertaking home-country based training courses when based so far from home affects both provision and take-up of such interventions (IRC/ORC Worldwide, 2007).

The barriers to gaining access to interventions that help to improve technical capability and/or achieve senior organisational positions are potentially similar for men and women. However, it must be recognised that women are affected differentially – they are under-represented as expatriates yet motivated to take international assignments (Linehan, 2019). Training can be used as a means of helping to enhance skills and capabilities as well as widening opportunities for global leadership development (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2002). So, although access to training on expatriation can be limited for both sexes, this potentially reinforces women's already reduced expatriate career opportunities.

This research takes female expatriates as its specific focus. It sets out to hear their voices to seek to understand further women's participation in job-related training and assess how organisational training interventions might assist women's entry into and progression within technical and managerial expatriate careers. It is set within the context of oil and gas exploration.

The oil and gas industry

Although there is a lack of official statistics providing definitive data on the numbers of expatriates deployed worldwide, the oil and gas industry is reported as a major user of expatriates compared with other sectors (Shortland, 2016). Practitioner data, while

acknowledged as reflecting limited samples/geographies and having potential bias associated with data representative of client-only participation, does nonetheless help to provide a picture of this industry. For example, Air Inc.'s (2017) survey reports that 7.8% of the oil and gas industry's workforce comprises expatriate personnel. This compares with expatriates making up 2.8% of all-industry workforces. As Shortland (2016) points out, companies in the oil and gas sector typically have large retail operations (such as petrol stations) which typically would not deploy expatriates. If non-mobile retail operations are excluded, and just the exploration part of the oil and gas sector which deploys expatriates is considered, the percentage of the workforce employed as expatriates is likely to be higher than practitioner survey data suggest in respect of the sector as a whole.

Data are sparse on women's expatriate participation by sector but there is some evidence of increasing female expatriation in oil and gas – rising from 4% in 1990 (ORC/CBI, 1990) to 7-15% in 2009 (Shortland, 2009). This suggests that the sector has had some success in improving expatriate gender diversity aligned with its stated commitment to this objective (Shortland, 2016). When women's participation percentage is applied to large numerical volumes of exploration expatriates, the actual number of women deployed internationally is potentially sizeable offering viable female expatriate research samples.

Global working acts as a talent pipeline (Dragoni *et al.*, 2014) and so support given to women to progress within expatriate roles can be viewed in the context of organisational effort to increase diversity within senior management positions. Oil and gas industry exploration activities frequently occur in remote and challenging geographical locations (Markus, 2015). The literature highlights that male expatriates are more willing to relocate to dangerous environments than women, partly due to men's more pronounced levels of sensation-seeking (Stoermer *et al.*, 2017). It also suggests that female expatriates are subject to greater levels of workplace gender harassment than men, particularly in masculine host

country environments where gender discrimination is institutionalised (Bader *et al.*, 2018). Hearing women's voices on the issues that they face in advancing their knowledge and capabilities set within the context of the support that they receive in a masculine environment such as oil and gas exploration can therefore offer a distinct and relevant research perspective.

Method

Research design, approach and context

Yin (2018) notes that case studies are generally preferred as a research strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are posed, there is an in-depth contemporary focus within a real life context, and decision-making can be explained by triangulating numerous variables and multiple sources of evidence. Given this backdrop, the research strategy that was considered most appropriate was that of a case study, the case being female expatriates' perceptions of training provision in oil and gas exploration. A triangulated research approach was used supporting research validity (Yin, 2018). Data were examined from three sources: expatriate training policies (highlighting organisational intent); HR training implementers (highlighting organisation action); and the female assignee training recipients (highlighting similarities and differences in outcomes flowing from organisational intention versus action).

A research proposal to investigate a range of issues related to the participation of women in expatriation was presented to 18 global oil and gas firms with UK bases of operation represented by the UK Oil and Gas Industry Peer Group. This current study relates to the findings from one specific aspect of this wider project and concerns female expatriates' views on the contribution and relevance of training to their expatriate career progression and their perceptions of access to training interventions. Two medium-sized companies both with upstream oil and gas exploration operations agreed to participate on an anonymous basis, enabling a comparison of differences as well as the identification of similarities in

organisational approaches and outcomes across the two firms. Given pseudonyms of Oil Co and Gas Co, these organisations had operations in 20 and 30 countries respectively. Women comprised 40% of Oil Co's global workforce and 28% in Gas Co. With respect to these firms' expatriate populations, Oil Co employed 27 and Gas Co 66 female expatriates, representing 8% and 11% of their total expatriate workforces respectively.

Research participants

The International Assignments Managers (IAMs) within the Human Resources (HR) departments in each firm acted as organisational gatekeepers. Each gave access to their expatriate policies on a confidential basis, agreed to be interviewed themselves in depth, and facilitated research interviews with other relevant HR professionals who had input into expatriate training programmes (one in Oil Co; six in Gas Co). Details of their roles and responsibilities are given in Table 1.

Place Table 1 here

Each IAM also provided research access to their female expatriates who were currently on assignment, contacting them to tell them about the study and offer them the opportunity to participate. Broad demographic information (including name, location, grade, job roles/functions) were supplied together with email contact details. All 93 women were contacted and 55 offered themselves for interview. Due to time constraints and the women's work schedules, 26 were selected using stratified sampling (eight in Oil Co; 18 in Gas Co) (Collis and Hussey, 2009), taking into consideration their home/host locations, assignment types and seniority/grade. To maintain anonymity, each female expatriate was given a participant letter, actual home and host country locations were generalised to a regional level, and specific grade descriptors were collapsed down into a four-fold classification of junior, middle and senior management, and graduate trainees. This ensured that individual women could not be identified, given their paucity in each location. The majority were undertaking

long-term assignments, although there was some female expatriate representation from short-term and rotational assignments. Two women represented senior expatriate grades; half were in the middle grades; with the remainder in junior management or graduate trainee roles.

Their profiles are presented in Table 2.

Place Table 2 here

Organisational expatriate policy documents were read to identify any job-related training interventions. Using these data and information from the literature review, a semi-structured interview schedule was devised to discuss training implementation with the HR representatives. The semi-structured HR interviews addressed: the nature of any pre-selection training if potential expatriates lacked any of the skills sets sought for the role; training/skills preparation offered to expatriates post-selection; any emphasis placed on supporting women's skills development during expatriation; and how equality/diversity principles were embedded within expatriate training.

The female assignees were asked which of the training interventions described in their organisations' international assignment policies they were offered and took part in. They were also asked to comment on the importance that they attached to being able to participate in each of these interventions in respect of enabling them to undertake their current and/or any future assignments. Additional questions addressed the extent to which the women believed current and future training interventions would be instrumental to achieving future assignment opportunities, and how their employers could better support women expatriates through training.

All interviews were conducted in private, on company premises, on a confidential basis: either face-to-face if the interviewee was in the UK, or by telephone. Each conversation followed the same format of semi-structured interview questions as described

above. Interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed. Interviews took between 30 and 90 minutes, averaging around an hour.

Data analysis

The HR and assignee interview transcripts were subject to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, the transcripts were coded using a colour key to identify the main themes and sub-themes. Following this, the data were coded afresh using NVivo and coding trees were created. The purpose of this double coding process was to reduce coding drift. The two sets of coding exercises were compared and any differences in how the interview transcripts had been coded were resolved through re-visiting the transcripts and re-coding as necessary. Two main themes were identified relating to job-related training linked to current and future roles, and assignment factors affecting job-related training access. Eight sub-themes were identified in relation to the first theme of job-related training: course provision, office attendance, technical, within role, managerial, relational, another role, and relevance. While it is acknowledged that there is likely to be some overlap between managerial, relational and technical training (managers need to manage others, conduct interpersonal communications and keep up-to-date with the technical aspects of their job), the transcripts were coded to distinguish between these potentially overlapping aspects. Four sub-themes were identified relating to training access: assignment limitations, working offshore, travel and budgets.

Quotations were recorded under each of these codes with frequency counts noted of the number of people commenting on each issue together with the number of times that they made reference to it. By doing this, it was ensured that the themes determined and quotations used in presenting the findings were those of importance to the range of HR professionals and women expatriates interviewed rather than isolated opinions. Frequency counts also enabled a comparison of emphasis placed on a particular issue by HR and the women assignees. Table 3 summarises the NVivo coding themes, gives an explanation of each, and provides the

numbers of interviewees citing particular issues together with the numbers of references made to each. Notwithstanding this, it is important to highlight that the content of the quotations was also important in the data analysis in order to hear the participants' voices and present these within the findings. It was also recognised that reliance on frequency counts alone could lead to biased representation given that the numbers of sources could not be equal for every issue.

Place Table 3 here

Findings

This section presents an analysis of the interview materials aligned to the two research questions. First, under Theme 1, it reviews the job-related training interventions that HR staff report are offered in policy/practice and presents expatriate women's views on their value in supporting their current and future international assignment participation. Next, under Theme 2, it addresses access to job-related training for assignees as articulated by the HR representatives, and sets out female expatriates' perceptions of their access to these training interventions. In each section the sub-themes identified during the data coding are used as signposts to guide the storyline as revealed by the HR personnel and through hearing the women assignees' voices.

Theme 1: Job-related training offered and its value to expatriate women's current and future international assignment participation

It was notable that both firms' international assignment (IA) policies made only limited mention of training interventions and neither firm had a specific expatriate training policy. Oil Co's HR staff reported the use of a 70% experiential, 20% relational and 10% educational framework, with the assignment itself considered to provide experiential development. Gas Co's IA policy highlighted encouragement to expatriates to continue with job-related training outside of their home country, noting that learning objectives would be mutually agreed

between the expatriates, their home and host country line managers, and their functional managers, and be monitored regularly. In Gas Co's reporting structure, every expatriate was part of a 'skills set', headed up by a functional manager with technical specialist expertise who could be based anywhere in the world. These functional managers held responsibility for the career development of all employees, expatriates and line managers within their skills set globally.

Sub-theme 1a Course provision: Gas Co's HR personnel placed considerable emphasis on training courses as these were considered to increase individuals' value to the firm, enhance the business, and improve assignees' CVs:

"We have a concept ... about net present value (NPV) so you are empowered within reason to undertake training programmes, and it is about increasing your NPV ... but also about your career and CV if you move on." (IAM, Gas Co)

However, the course content offered was, in effect, aimed more closely at NPV objectives than furthering individuals' careers:

"The core curriculum is ... aligned to the business strategy ... The asset (host country operational business unit) will ... select themselves which programmes they want to run ... if there is an end product (business objective) in that need." (HRT, Gas Co)

Gas Co's HR staff suggested that if "you want to develop in that area ... you get management approval (and) you're on the course" (HRT, Gas Co) but, because course attendance was subject to budgetary constraints, they acknowledged that the likelihood of being able to access this training just for personal development was low. Oil Co's HR personnel were more forthright in stating that their firm placed limited value on course attendance unless its content could be directly applied to business objectives:

"It's not to say that there is not value if it is specific ... But how do you then bring it back into the business, how do you then embed it?" (L&D, Oil Co)

Although courses were designed to serve the business strategy in Gas Co and rarely offered in Oil Co, the female assignees in both firms recognised that training course participation could improve their knowledge and capability within their current roles. All of the women expatriates said they undertook the courses offered to them. Assignees were especially positive about educational courses:

“They are paying for me to do a sustainable development course, and I think that has been massively important.” (#Y)

Sub-theme 1b Office attendance training: Oil Co’s IA policy highlighted 18 days’ office attendance training for rotational assignees which they could attend in their own time when off-shift. Gas Co’s IA policy did not specifically mention this but the HR representatives confirmed that office attendance training was also offered by their firm. The female assignees were positive about this as it brought them up-to-date with recent organisational issues and priorities:

“(Oil Co) organises training in (headquarters) from time to time, so I tend to go on this whenever I can ... it is excellent.” (#C)

Sub-theme 1c Technical: Technical training was usually delivered on-the-job. It was reported by the female assignees as “supportive” (#N) and “important” (#D) as it addressed “a key critical need ... keeping (me) abreast with what’s happening on site” (#E). It was identified as being of particular importance by those women whose current job roles involved working with new processes and equipment in unfamiliar and challenging locations:

“I really needed to get the whole picture of the offshore process. So I went through something between training and going for one week to provide me with the whole picture of the equipment and the offshore environment, how the offshore people work together. So that really helped me to understand the methodology.” (#G)

Sub-theme 1d Within role: The examples above help to demonstrate female expatriates' emphasis on how training courses and technical skills enhancement could assist them in their current jobs. However, the women assignees focused on future ambitions and sought knowledge and capabilities to serve these. In this respect they reported that training received in-role was not pitched at the right level, and its provision was sometimes viewed as 'lip service':

"I kind of felt that I could come and teach this better than the gentleman who is doing it which, in essence, comes from (already) having the experience." (#S)

"People occasionally throw you a training need. Training courses are used to keep people quiet on that one. So (they say) 'you have got a training course, so therefore you have got some development'." (#R)

Sub-theme 1e Managerial: The HR representatives in both firms said that managerial training was available and that women expatriates could avail themselves of this to aid their development and potential promotion prospects. Managerial training was considered as potentially "value adding, relevant" (#U) by the women assignees. However, despite both firms' HR staff reporting the availability of managerial training, the female assignees made relatively few references to this being offered to them, instead reporting "the concept of developing people ... is quite lacking" (#F) and "I have had no managerial training" (#W).

Sub-theme 1f Relational: Both firms' HR respondents recognised that women faced problems in working in male-dominated oil and gas exploration operations. They emphasised that relational training ("how do you build relationships, what behaviours do you display", L&D, Oil Co) was offered, highlighting how this could support women's further expatriation access:

"I think for women, the programmes around self-awareness, understanding your strengths and weaknesses, and how you impact others and their different strategies for

engaging people ... would help boost confidence in women ... (they) need to improve their capabilities in having difficult conversations and talking at a behavioural level, rather than just at a technical level.” (HRT, Gas Co)

However, the female assignees reported relational skills training as unnecessary and irrelevant. They commented, for example, that it had not “equipped me better” (#L). They cited instead the importance of discussing technical issues with other professionals within their own discipline (“your career is developed by your professional family, not by the people that you work with”, #U) and talking to colleagues who could advise on technical skills requirements across the firm:

“I started mainly having these conversations with the head geologist because I know him, he was a skill area adviser and he knows exactly what needs to be done.” (#F)

Sub-theme 1g Another role: Although female expatriates said that training was important for success in their current job roles, job-related courses and technical skills training did not provide the necessary foundation for promotion. They said it did “not change anything significantly enough” (#I) to make “any difference as to what role you will be considered for next” (#R). They wanted training to assist with future career-enhancing opportunities but they found that what they received had “no correlation ... (with) getting the (next) expatriate positions” (#X). They explained:

“You are trained to become better within the role you are in, rather than have training to become better in another role.” (#O)

So, to move into an alternative field or progress upwards, assignees said it was necessary to do the work which provided on-the-job training, and then ask for any additional job-related training otherwise approval for it would be unlikely “because it has got nothing to do with what you are doing” (#U).

Sub-theme 1h Relevance: Women assignees stressed the relevance that they attached to increasing their skills, knowledge and experience from new expatriate work opportunities. They recognised that relevant on-the-job training delivered within other expatriate positions at similar or higher grades in allied or alternative fields would build their human capital. They considered this crucial to their international career ambitions. Entering expatriate job roles that provided the relevant training they wanted was, however, described as difficult. HR personnel explained that function heads sought to fill posts with individuals who already held (and were known to possess) the relevant knowledge and capabilities ahead of expatriate job opportunities being more widely advertised in order to increase the chance of successful appointment:

“Heads of functions ... make sure that their function has the capability and capacity required for the businesses going forward ... So although we say you should advertise (all expatriate positions)... and I would say he will do that, but he will already have, if you like, a favoured candidate where he thinks well ... ‘they would actually be really good people to put into that slot’.” (RM, Gas Co)

The female assignees therefore stressed the importance of being highly proactive in seeking out expatriate job opportunities that could deliver relevant training. For example:

“I pushed to move to be in (East Asia), because I knew that there was a need for a resource out there. My (previous) manager ... was the contracts manager for well engineering ... I didn’t work for him directly (now) but ... I heard that he was desperately looking for help, and when he called, he mentioned this and it was an option if I wanted to take it. So I knew about it and I did.” (#T)

Theme 1 summary: These findings indicate that while HR believed that formal training in relational and managerial skills could provide the key to women improving their career prospects in the male-dominated oil and gas environment, the lack of perceived

relevance of relational training and lack of provision of managerial training meant that female assignees saw little value in them. The female assignees saw far greater benefit in identifying and entering work roles that could provide them with critical knowledge and technical skills development opportunities. Once they gained sufficient learning from these roles, this could pave the way for their future expatriate advancement.

Theme 2: Access to job-related training for assignees and expatriate women's perceptions of training access

This section highlights the views of HR personnel and female expatriates in relation to training access constraints.

Sub-theme 2a Assignment limitations: HR staff in both firms acknowledged problems in delivering training to expatriates (“it would be slightly trickier if they were overseas”, IAM, Gas Co; “we normally don’t have the time”, IAM, Oil Co). The HR respondents explained that the assignment location could preclude training delivery, particularly in geographically remote environments. However, the HR representatives stressed that training could be offered in the majority of the assets subject to demand. However, in contrast to the HR view, the women assignees reported local training provision as minimal or non-existent (“The training hasn’t been that plentiful and not that accessible either”, #J; “There’s not really adequate training whilst you’re out in assets”, #T). They expressed considerable dissatisfaction with this, wanting more on site.

Sub-theme 2b Working offshore: For assignees working on oil rigs in the sea, HR staff said that delivery of training would usually be given in headquarters or in their home country. Assignees confirmed that this could be undertaken when off-shift.

Sub-theme 2c Travel: HR focused on the need for time off and the requirement to travel to where training was delivered, identifying these as problems especially when expatriates were working in remote or offshore environments. Women assignees confirmed

having to take time out and travel abroad to access training, but said that travelling was necessary - and therefore problematic - even when they were based in major regional centres.

This was because relevant training was not delivered where they were based:

“One of the issues that we have out in East Asia is that it is damn expensive to fly people to other parts of the world. So if you find one of these workshops is going on in (US headquarters) you will find that one or two people will be able to go to it and it will be a specialist need requirement rather than to learn new stuff and go and meet new people and ... the courses available in Asia are extremely limited. So I’m not going to be doing any training probably this year.” (#D)

“They use the Geoscience Training Alliance, which is basically a group of companies who contribute to pay for this training. A lot of those courses are run from either from the UK or the US or they are headquarters-based and it is the first thing that gets cut when budgets are tight ... So I would say that I have missed out on a lot of training because of that ... It has been a frustrating part of being an overseas assignee.” (#W)

Sub-theme 2d Budgets: HR staff acknowledged the need for expatriates to gain line manager approval for training in the face of budgetary constraints but said that this should not be a major barrier, as each asset had a training budget. However, the women assignees disagreed and reported that budgetary constraints proved to be an insurmountable hurdle to gaining knowledge, learning new skills and making valuable contacts. A particular issue concerned the women assignees’ ability to convince their line manager to release necessary finance to support their knowledge acquisition through training opportunities. Women reported their sense of lack of line manager transparency in relation to who could access budgets and for what purpose, with unequal distribution of resources:

“They are supposed to hold it (the budget) all centrally now, so that makes it easier for graduates in each asset to get access to an equal amount of training opportunities.

But ... I don't know where the budget is because whenever I have asked for training, I have been told that there isn't any." (#J)

The women assignees reported that they sensed that requesting training appeared to be less of an issue for their male colleagues, even when budgetary constraints were in force:

"There is a male majority and ... a lot (of them)... seem to manage to get training, where there seems to be no budget." (#M)

Going up the line and approaching more senior personnel, such as Gas Co's functional managers ostensibly responsible for career development of expatriates under their remit, also did not prove to be particularly successful for the women assignees:

"If I need training I have got to ask for it ... and I have done this in the past, trying to get the commercial function manager to help ... generally their ability to help is very limited." (K)

Recognising that they needed to further their knowledge to progress, some women assignees reported taking the matter into their own hands, for example by funding training themselves which they could do in post. They sought reimbursement later directly from finance thereby side-stepping the perceived unhelpful managerial line:

"I have a sinking feeling and so I grasp around trying to get online courses. The thing is we have a budget for training, which is agreed at business unit level, but it is always the same. I have to bang on to the finance department why I need more. I tend to make a lot of noise, and eventually I get reimbursed against expenses. So I'm having constant battles." (#U)

Theme 2 summary: These findings demonstrate further discrepancies between the views of HR and female expatriates. HR personnel acknowledge that location, travel and budget issues may affect expatriate training access opportunities but state that these should not prove to be barriers to assignees being trained, given that training can be delivered on-site

and budgets are available for off-site training. Women assignees, however, state that undertaking international assignments restricts their opportunity to gain new skills and knowledge that could be valuable to their career progression, primarily due to budgetary restrictions. Budgets also have an impact on travelling to attend training. While not directly articulating potential discriminatory practices precluding women gaining training access in favour of men, female expatriates perceive a lack of managerial transparency in allocating training resources and felt that this may differentially favour their male colleagues.

Discussion

Two critical findings emerged from this study. First, there was a clear discrepancy between the views of HR staff and women assignees as to the value of the training interventions offered to assist women to further their expatriate careers and in relation to training access limitations for expatriates. Second, women assignees perceived a lack of transparency in the distribution of training resources and that their male colleagues were potentially more easily able to access training than they were.

HR personnel placed emphasis on the provision of relational and managerial skills training which they believed would best support female expatriates' career progression. In contrast, women assignees believed that technical training provided the key to gaining future expatriate roles. While acknowledging some assignment-related constraints to job-related training provision, HR personnel thought that training interventions should be accessible locally and that budgets supported these effectively. Women assignees reported the opposite.

The female expatriates in this study noted that places available on technical training courses offered by oil and gas training providers industry-wide (representing training general to the industry) were some of the first interventions cut when budgets were tight. Instead their firms focused on specific 'end-product' training investment linked to asset objectives. This follows human capital theory's predictions that general training is likely to have far less

economic utility to the firm investing in its provision than more specific training (Becker, 2009) particularly when human capital development can offer a valuable unit-level resource (Ployhart and Moliterno, 2011). It is therefore surprising that HR staff placed emphasis on the provision of general relational training to women purportedly to facilitate connections needed to access specific training in their firms' masculine managerial cultures. While it must be acknowledged that the specificity of on-the-job training providing technical capability is unlikely to be 'complete' (meaning that potentially other firms can also benefit from this if employees leave and join competitors), it would nonetheless be expected following human capital theory (Becker, 2009) that HR would see greater value in the provision of specific training to improve women's human capital than general training.

Shen *et al.* (2009) suggest that women have lower training programme participation than men. This study finds, however, that women's willingness to participate is not an issue; when offered training, female expatriates take it up. This indicates that women do see training interventions (particularly those related to improving technical capability) as valuable in supporting their careers by building their knowledge and skills. Job-related training supports expatriates in their current roles but its content does not 'future-proof' human capital development by addressing knowledge requirements needed to access additional expatriate positions. Multiple expatriate assignments build skills, knowledge and experience and can help individuals to gain more senior positions either in technical roles or in leadership and management (Ramaswami *et al.*, 2016; Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007). Human capital theory (Becker, 2009) predicts that when individuals hold knowledge specific to employer operations, both firms and individuals benefit economically. If women hold such improved human capital, this potentially leads to their increased representation in more senior organisational roles. To gain relevant on-the-job training necessary for future career advancement, women must enter new expatriate roles either at a similar or higher grade as

both can enable opportunities to gain different knowledge and skills. For female expatriates in a male-dominated workplace this can prove difficult, particularly with non-transparent expatriate selection processes (Harris, 2002).

Competitive pressures mean that exploration operations require skills and capabilities to be in place to meet targets quickly. Thus, when selecting for an expatriate role, oil and gas asset managers seek individuals who already hold the required knowledge and technical capability, given the budgetary and location constraints on training provision in post. The espoused openly competitive expatriate selection process is therefore undermined by management appointing people already known to hold the necessary human capital. Hence, female expatriates point out unless individuals are already trained appropriately they are unlikely to be eligible for future expatriate positions. This suggests disadvantage for all expatriates seeking to gain international career advancement. Metcalfe's (2007) study of female professionals in the masculine environment of the Middle East reports training opportunities provided to men ahead of women. In this expatriate oil and gas research study, female expatriates working in masculine exploration environments perceived a lack of transparency in the allocation of training resources and felt that their male colleagues found it easier to access training than they did. This may chime with Metcalfe's (2007) findings but it was not clear from this oil and gas study whether preferential treatment was accorded to male expatriates by the firms' asset line managers or whether men employed different approaches to women in pursuing job-related training.

The mismatch between the views of HR and female assignees with respect to training access is concerning because it indicates a gulf between headquarters' expectations and local practice in operational subsidiaries. Training was delivered and was accessible in headquarters (as evidenced by office attendance training for rotational assignees) but out in the assets, training practice did not align with this. This indicates a lack of strategic fit with

organisational goals. The mismatches in both content (practice to achieve a particular objective) and process (design and delivery that creates shared understanding of content) led to women assignees interpreting training idiosyncratically. When these experiences of discrepancies between policy intent and implementation were pooled, a shared perception was generated at odds with organisational goals of improving business performance through employee training (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004).

Bowen and Ostroff (2004) report that if HRM systems are to hold the strength to support business strategy, HR interventions should build distinctiveness, consistency and consensus, and employees must receive information that is both adequate and unambiguous in these respects. Distinctive interventions should be visible, understandable, relevant, and reflect legitimate authority. The authors note that training is an HR practice with high visibility, typically with clear content and so is readily understandable, and it can be seen as relevant to individuals' goals as well as those of the organisation. In this oil and gas study, job-related training met these three criteria. However, the lack of management support ensuring equitable training delivery between expatriates based in assets and those based in headquarters indicated shortcomings in legitimate authority. When HR intervention outcomes are relevant (as human capital development certainly was to the women assignees in this study), and individuals are dependent on the outcome of an individual's actions to provide the intervention, attention is focused on its source. Women in this study focused on colleagues and managers in their professional disciplines who could give them access to specific technical skills to advance their human capital, rather than functional/asset line managers who were the individuals with legitimate authority for training provision.

With respect to consistency Bowen and Ostroff (2004) note that HR interventions should demonstrate instrumentality (an unambiguous cause-effect relationship), validity (consistency between intention and outcome) and delivery of a consistent HRM message

(aligned to other HR interventions). In this oil and gas study, consistency of job-related training was undermined by the lack of relevance of the type of training offered and highlighted by HR as valuable to women's expatriate careers (such as relational training) and by this contrasting with women's and the assets' need for human capital development in technical skills. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) also point to the need to try to achieve consensus among employees with regard to understanding the distribution of HR interventions, noting that this is underpinned by agreement among principal decision-makers and fairness in delivery outcomes. Consensus was undermined as female expatriates in this study attached their own meaning to training practices, perceiving and interpreting these subjectively. This was illustrated, for example, by their perceptions of differences between male and female expatriates' training access. Nishii *et al.* (2008) explain that if those communicating interventions are not viewed as credible, employees may rely on their subjective perceptions when interpreting HR practices. Perceptions of the motives behind HR practices play an important part in the achievement of organisational outcomes. If female assignees attribute HR practices as motivated by concern for enhancing their human capital, rather viewing job-related training as governed by cost reduction measures (such as budget constraints), a more positive employee attitude towards the organisation and its strategic goals is likely to be engendered.

In this research study women comprised 8-11% of the expatriate populations but each of the two firms had only one senior-graded female expatriate. This reflects data in other oil and gas and mining industry studies which show poor representation of women in senior and executive roles (Catalyst, 2019; Richardson *et al.*, 2014). The literature proposes gender-based stereotyping including women's suggested lack of competence, male-biased selection criteria and societal assumptions concerning women's family responsibilities as factors which influence business failure to offer career development opportunities to women, even when

they actively seek out opportunities for high level assignments and exceed performance expectations (Mattis, 2005). As Linehan (2017) suggests, a masculine ethic is potentially in play: male traits being seen to be necessary for effective leadership. Expatriate experience contributes to senior managerial competencies (Doherty and Dickmann, 2012) but changing women by raising their human capital (through, for example, expatriate training) will have little effect in promoting gender equality if the workplace context perpetuates their disadvantage (Kossek *et al.*, 2017). If the number of women achieving senior and executive positions is to increase, organisational action is required to improve expatriate gender diversity: any potential institutionalised gender issues must be tackled and equality, diversity and inclusion objectives met.

Implications for practice

This study raises a number of implications for practice. Relevant technical skills training aligned with asset-level human resource development objectives and which is of value to female expatriates to support future expatriate role acquisition is required. Clear lines of legitimate authority should be identified so that female assignees know who holds responsibility for training provision. Training resource allocation decisions must be transparent and distribution outcomes fair. Communications regarding training allocation should be credible and display a positive message about improving human capital outcomes rather than focusing on cost constraints. As far as practicable, training opportunities should be aligned so expatriates working in host country business operations are not disadvantaged compared to assignees working in - or who can regularly return to - headquarters.

Institutionalised masculine cultures must be broken down and organisational support given to improve women's human capital for future expatriate role participation if progress is to be made in increasing expatriate gender diversity and access to senior level positions.

Research limitations and further research

This research study examined how current female expatriates viewed organisational training in supporting subsequent expatriation. It was conducted in two oil and gas firms using a cross-sectional methodology. Further research in a wider range of industries and carried out longitudinally is necessary to assess the longer-term effects of training interventions on women's expatriate participation. Further research on expatriate women's career progression into more senior positions on return home is also needed. This could be supported by research into training interventions before repatriation. This study recognised headquarters and primary US/UK sites as the main training course delivery locations, but did not differentiate between training opportunities offered in traditional expatriate developed locations and those in newly-emerging economies. A study that further explores any location differences in how training can support women's expatriate careers could also prove to be a useful line of enquiry as organisations pursue a wider global presence. This study heard women's unique, minority voice in oil and gas exploration assets. Access was not given to line management or male expatriates due to time and resource constraints. Further research would benefit from line managers' input to understand their perspective on issues such as training allocation, and from comparing male and female expatriates' views on the efficacy of training received along with the actions that both sexes take to access training in support of their human capital development and international careers.

Concluding remarks

The findings of this study indicate the importance of hearing women's voices to understand which training interventions they believe can best support their current and future expatriate participation in relation to those actually made available to them. On-the-job training develops enhanced knowledge and skills necessary in current roles but does not provide women assignees with the necessary human capital for their desired future expatriate positions. Yet, business pressures require individuals to hold necessary human capital ahead

of appointment given the limited training opportunities for expatriates once in role. Female assignees seek relevant job-related training to improve their human capital so that they can gain subsequent, career-enhancing expatriate positions but report challenges in accessing such training opportunities.

There are clear discrepancies between the views of HR personnel and female assignees in respect of both the value of job-related training interventions offered and access to these in an expatriate context. HR personnel place emphasis on women's ability to progress their expatriate careers by undertaking relational and managerial training, while women assignees see far greater benefit in relevant technical training. HR personnel acknowledge location and budget issues but do not see these as barriers to training access. Female assignees state budgetary constraints limit their training, and perceive a lack of transparency when training is allocated. To strengthen HRM expatriate training interventions in support of business strategy, effort must be invested to ensure unambiguous managerial support, consistency in delivery, and fairness in outcomes across organisations' global spheres of operation.

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Table 1: HR interviewees' roles and responsibilities

Oil Co's HR interviewees	Gas Co's HR interviewees
International Assignments Manager (IAM) Learning and Development (L&D)	International Assignments Manager (IAM) Graduate Scheme Manager (GSM) Resourcing Manager (RM) Function Head (FH) Learning and Development (L&D) Training (HRT) Development (HRD)

Table 2: Female expatriate interviewee profiles

Participant letter	Sending location	Host location	Assignment type	Occupation	Management grade/ Graduate scheme
			Oil Co		
#A	Western Europe	East Asia	Long-term	Engineer	Middle
#B	North America	Central Asia	Long-term	Engineer	Senior
#C	Western Europe	North Africa	Rotation	Geologist	Junior
#D	Western Europe	East Asia	Long-term	Geologist	Junior
#E	East Asia	Western Europe	Long-term	Human Resources	Middle
#F	North America	East Asia	Long-term	Geophysicist	Junior
#G	East Asia	North America	Long-term	Health and Safety	Middle
#H	North America	Western Europe	Long-term	Information Management	Middle
			Gas Co		
#I	Western Europe	Caribbean	Long-term	Geologist	Junior
#J	Western Europe	North America	Short-term	Graduate Trainee	Graduate
#K	Australasia	West Africa	Long-term	Analyst	Junior
#L	Western Europe	Australasia	Long-term	Business Development	Junior
#M	Western Europe	Central Asia	Long-term	Commercial Manager	Middle
#N	Western Europe	Middle East	Long-term	Engineer	Junior
#O	Western Europe	Australasia	Long-term	IT Specialist	Junior
#P	Western Europe	Western Europe	Long-term	Economist	Junior
#Q	Australasia	Central Asia	Rotation	Communications	Middle
#R	Western Europe	Australasia	Long-term	Performance Manager	Middle
#S	Western Europe	North Africa	Long-term	Commercial Manager	Senior
#T	Western Europe	East Asia	Short-term	Engineer	Graduate
#U	Western Europe	North Africa	Long-term	Lawyer	Middle
#V	Caribbean	North America	Long-term	Lawyer	Middle
#W	Western Europe	East Asia	Long-term	Geologist	Middle
#X	Caribbean	West Africa	Long-term	Commercial Manager	Middle
#Y	Western Europe	Central Asia	Long-term	Commercial Manager	Middle
#Z	Western Europe	Central Asia	Rotation	Human Resources	Middle

Table 3: NVivo coding themes, explanations and numbers of interviewee and reference citations

NVivo coding themes and code explanations		Women expatriate interviewees		HR interviewees	
1 st level code	2 nd level code	Number citing issue	Number of references made	Number citing issue	Number of references made
Job-related = job-related training linked to current role/changing role	Another role = training undertaken to gain a future role	5	7	0	0
	Course provision = short-term skills intervention via job/university course	8	12	3	8
	Managerial skills = leadership and management of others	3	4	4	7
	Office attendance = training for rotational workers when off-shift	3	3	0	0
	Relational skills = interpersonal communication/professional interactions	2	3	5	12
	Relevance = courses/training required/not needed in current role/position	10	14	0	0
	Technical skills = technical training/skills and knowledge required for the job	8	15	4	4
	Within role = on-the-job training in current role	7	10	1	1
Assignment-related = job-related training access issues/concerns affected by expatriation	Assignment limitations = training precluded while on assignment/extra training required	9	19	2	2
	Budget = financial impact of undertaking training while on assignment	12	22	2	2
	Travel = impact of need to travel to attend training/associated costs/timing issues	6	11	2	5
	Working offshore = training for offshore workers on oil rigs in the sea	1	2	1	3