AN ASSIGNMENT ABROAD: EXPERIENCES FROM FINNISH EXPATRIATES IN THE ARAB WORLD

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This paper deals with the Finnish expatriates (i.e. people on international assignments) who have gained relevant work experience in the Arab world.[1] The primary object of the study was to discover the various experiences and especially the cultural-clash events of the expatriates while abroad. I will use the term Arab world to refer to the predominant Arabic-Islamic culture and mode of action in Arab countries,[2] particularly in business and working life. The term Arab does not refer to race, religion or nationality; an Arab can be anyone who speaks Arabic[3] as his mother tongue and feels the Arabic cultural heritage to be his own whether he is a Muslim or a Christian. The amount of Muslims in the Arab population is 85–90%.[4]

The background theory is based on culture shock, the meaning of social skills, different viewpoints on time and communication styles, as well as Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The stress is on multicultural working-life conflicts. The secondary object of the study was to determine whether there was any difference in the adjustment process considering the two groups involved: those who had been offered predeparture cultural training and those who were not offered any training.

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[1] This article is based on my MA thesis "Mumkin bukra inshallah" – suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia arabialais-islamilaisesta työkulttuurista (Colliander 2004).

[2] The Arab countries consist of the membership states of the Arab League, which was established in 1945 as a common special interest group for the Arab countries in the field of politics and economics. It has 22 members: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

[3] The Arabic language is one of the six official languages of the United Nations and it is spoken by 200 million people. The classical Arabic of the Koran is the highest form of the Arabic language and the Muslims of non-Arab countries (i.e. Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey) also use it in religious connections. Modern Standard Arabic (ar. *fuṣḥa*) is an official language of the media and it is used in newspapers and formal speeches. A literate person does not encounter any difficulties when travelling in other Arab countries as long as he deals with other literate people. Difficulties arise when one tries to communicate with illiterate people across dialect borders. The dialects of colloquial Arabic have developed and diverged in different countries and therefore a Tunisian and an Iraqi will not necessarily understand each other's dialect. The dialects of Arabic can be divided into four: Syrian dialect, the Arabic Peninsula dialect, Moroccan dialect and Egyptian dialect. (Feghali 1997: 357; Almaney & Alwan 1982: 79–85)

[4] Almaney & Alwan 1982: 30–31; Glassé 1989: 48; Newby 2002: 31–32; Feghali 1997: 347.

The data were collected mainly in 1999 as an inquiry using a half-structured questionnaire consisting of questions concerning general information about expatriates' background, cultural training and their own experiences of working in the Arab world. The target group consisted of 44 Finnish expatriates who had been working in 19 different Arab countries. One-third of the group had been offered predeparture cultural training and two-thirds had not been offered any training. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. As a result, from the data three different types of thinking styles emerged, of which I will use the following terms: one-dimensional, neutral and multi-dimensional thinking. Over one-third of the whole target group shared the neutral type of thinking style. When examining more closely the group that had been offered some cultural training, it consisted mostly of neutral and multi-dimensional thinkers whereas the group that had not been offered any training consisted mostly of neutral and one-dimensional thinkers. However, it is not the cultural training but the time spent in a foreign country that seems to be the key factor in developing the multi-dimensional thinking style. It seems that, above all, cultural training influences positively a realistic and objective attitude towards the country of destination and in this way benefits both the employer and the employee.

Finnish expatriates show a good ability for adjustment to Arabic-Islamic work culture whether they were offered predeparture training or not. Most of the conflicts in working life arose from a lack of realistic knowledge; the different social structure of the society in Arab countries as well as different time concepts and dissimilar working methods caused unneeded extra pressure on Finnish expatriates.

MANAGING CULTURES, TIME AND COMMUNICATION

Despite globalization, people from different parts of the world perceive issues from their own viewpoints and from their own set of values. In a multicultural office, English might be a commonly shared language with everyone using it, but applying the same concepts in their own way. This might create an illusion of similarity because one is not able to take into consideration the values beneath the surface. The cultural differences will appear only when something confusing happens and this is the point when one notices that despite the common language and concepts the same words may have been understood quite differently.[5] Expatriates who have had several assignments abroad have reported that the adjustment process follows a certain curve. The first step is the honeymoon phase when everything is exciting and wonderful. The second stage is the actual culture shock when the reality of everyday life is revealed. The third phase is adjusting to the new culture and at this point some acceptance of the local values has already happened and also the new

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[5]   Trux 2000: 14.

social network has been formed. The fourth step is a stable state of mind in the new environment. The state of mind can be negative if one still feels like an outsider or it can be as good as it was before when successful adjustment to the new culture has happened or it can be better than before if the so-called "going native" effect has happened. The curve of the cultural adjustment process can last from a few months up to several years.[6] What is culture shock actually? When the environment around us changes, all the familiar elements disappear and it is difficult to judge which conditions are significant and which are not. The ability to understand the local culture is lacking, so one has to use the interpretation system of one's own culture – often less successfully. The behavior of the local people seems irrational because the behavioral models and norms of the new culture are unknown. However, culture shock is a quite normal reaction to the stress the new environment is causing.[7] Nevertheless, there is also a positive effect of culture shock; experienced in small portions, it is seen as a significant factor in one's personal growth.[8]

Hofstede examined cultural differences in the working-life environment among IBM personnel in the 1980's. His study consisted of 50 countries including seven Arab countries: Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. As a result, four dimensions evolved out of his research: *power distance, collectivism – individualism, femininity – masculinity and uncertainty avoidance.*[9]

The roots of power distance lie strongly in the family. In those countries where power distance is large, children are expected to respect their parents and elderly people as a general rule. They are not encouraged to take initiatives by themselves nor to try things out on their own. There is an interdependent relationship between a child and an adult. On the other hand, in countries that have small power distance, adults tend to treat children more like equal individuals. Children are encouraged to try things independently on their own and there appears to be a clear need for this independence. Here there is a connection to working life – in countries with small power distance there is less dependency between the employee and the employer and a manager with negotiation skills is preferred. Also, the emotional distance is rather small and superiors and subordinates consider themselves more as equals. The ideal manager is a democrat who is there for the employees. By contrast, in countries with large power distance the employees choose to depend on their employer and the emotional distance is greater. The power is concentrated only in a few and the leading class has many privileges. The ideal manager is a kind autocrat or a father figure. Hofstede created a specific mathematic formula for all

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[6] Hofstede 1993: 299–300.
[7] Adler 1997: 238–239.
[8] Furnham 1977: 656; Adler 1975: 14; David 1971: 44.
[9] Hofstede 1993: 43–178.

the dimensions where the smallest value index equaled 0 and the largest 100. In Finland the power distance index was 33 whilst in the Arab countries it was 80.

In collective societies it is common to have extended families that can consist of – in addition to the nuclear family – grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and servants. The child becomes strongly integrated to "our" group, which provides its members protection and identity. The majority of the people in the world live in collective societies where the benefit of the group comes before the benefit of the individual. In individual societies – which are in the minority in our world – it is quite the opposite; the benefit of the individual comes before the benefit of the group. Nuclear families are common and the children learn to think only about themselves. The purpose of upbringing is to get the children to earn their own living as soon as possible. In working life, the factors that measure individualism are connected to time management when there has to be enough time for the family and also a certain freedom concerning tasks at work as well as the challenges of work and the feeling of success created by it. The factors connected with collectivism are the possibility to get training in order to improve one's skills, the possibility to utilize one's own abilities and have a functional working environment. The countries with small power distance tend to be more individual and countries with large power distance more collective, in other words Finland is an individual country having a small power distance while the Arab countries are collective countries having large power distance. Individualism was measured through the scale of 0–100 where 0 meant collective and 100 individual. Finland had a value of 63 and the Arab countries 38. Though there are differences between the Arab countries concerning collectivism Egypt appears to be less collective than Saudi Arabia. In collective societies it is essential to build a relationship of confidence between the business partners before starting any business actions. It is important to create a solid relationship first with the person(s) involved; the assignment itself can wait. In individual societies the task itself appears to be more important than the personal relationships. A western businessman who wants a business contract quickly and has no knowledge of the collective work culture is generally neglected and marginalized.

Hofstede defines social and cultural gender roles as feminine and masculine. Achievements outside the home are expected to interest men more than women. Men are supposed to be more competitive, more assertive and harder than women. On the other hand, women are expected to show interest in household management, nursing, children and relationships between people. In masculine societies the opportunity for a good income and acknowledgement of work well done and the opportunity to ascend in one's career are important factors. In feminine societies good relationships, cooperation, a good residential environment and continuity of one's employment are appreciated. The masculinity index is based on a scale where 0 equals the most feminine and 100 the most masculine value. Finland got the grade 25 and the Arab countries 53. The ideal manager in a masculine society

is an assertive, determined, lonely decision-maker and also aggressive in the positive sense of the word, while in a feminine society the ideal manager is more like an invisible character, acts more based on intuition, and searches for peaceful solutions. Discussing problems together and seeking common solutions is typical of the behavior at meetings and conferences of feminine countries while in masculine countries one tends to highlight one's own person and the focus is not on decision-making. When comparing masculinity-femininity and individualism-collectivism, it can be detected that Finland and the Arab countries are on opposite sides, Finland being more individual and feminine and the Arab countries being more collective and masculine.

The roots of uncertainty avoidance, like all the other dimensions, are in the family. Cultures that accept uncertainty do not consider divergent behavior or dissimilarity as a threat but as an interesting feature. In cultures that strongly avoid uncertainty, dissimilarity and uncertain situations are experienced as stressful and threatening. The more distressed the culture, the more it has different means of expression – talking with hands, raising the voice and showing one's emotions is socially approved. In those cultures that tolerate uncertainty well, there is less distress but also less expression – outbursts of feelings are not tolerated, the stress has to be kept inside. The uncertainty avoidance index is measured with the scale 0–100 where the lowest uncertainty avoidance is 0 and the highest 100. Finland scores a 59 compared to the 68 of the Arab countries. The feeling of distress is lower the more the society tolerates uncertainty. In working life this can be seen in the way that people in uncertainty avoiding cultures are constantly busy and the motto is "time is money". In cultures that tolerate uncertainty well there is no need for ceaseless working, employees can also rest and relax every now and then.

Different viewpoints on time concepts often lead to frustrations and prejudices in cross-cultural communication. Hall presents *monochronic* and *polychronic* time systems. In the monochronic system, i.e. in northern Europe, only one thing is handled at a time and accuracy and timetables are important whereas in the polychronic system, i.e. in the Mediterranean region, there are many things going on at the same time and committing to the partner is considered more important than the timetables.[10] The way of handling fixed appointments in the polychronic time concept may annoy people operating with the monochronic time system as the fixed timetables are not that important and everything can change even at the last minute.[11] In the American-European time concept, time is not only money but also a symbol of status and responsibility and the power to decide about your own time is essential.[12] In general, people living in the polychronic time concept, i.e. representatives of the Arab world, are in interaction with several people at the same

[10] Hall 1983: 45; 1976: 17.
[11] Hall 1976: 18–20.
[12] Hall 1983: 73–74.

time – they are almost never alone, not even at home. The polychronic time concept enables the concentration of power in a social organization due to the fact that the manager constantly deals with several people who are informed about what is going on. In order to manage one has to belong to the "inner circle" or make friends with people who know how things are handled. As stated by Feghali, in Arab countries it is common to use a middleman (ar. *wasṭa*) in everyday business life.[13] In polychronic cultures the job descriptions for every employee are strictly defined and placed in a detailed plan. In this way the employees can be supervised and the progress of the work can be controlled.[14] However, Manrai and Manrai state that in every culture there are both monochronic and polychronic time concepts in use.[15] According to Zaharna the western time concept emphasizes the future whereas the Arab culture stresses more the past – when referring to the future, the expression "inshallah" ('if it is God's will') is often added because only God has the power to make things happen.[16] Furthermore, Harris and Moran state that westerners believe that they themselves control their own time while in the Arab world time is controlled and regulated by God. For this reason the Arabs may have a rather fatalistic attitude towards time.[17] However, the time concept of the Arab world, especially regarding business relations, is gradually changing towards the monochronic time system.[18]

Language, communication and culture share mutual, invisible bonds with each other. When operating in one's own culture everything is easy and automatic, but in intercultural encounters all the familiar signs have different meanings and nothing seems to work as it should.[19] Hall defines different communication styles to *high* and *low context* cultures, where the high context cultures, such as the collective ones in the Middle East, express only a part of the information verbally. In contrast, the typical communication style for individual cultures (e.g. northern Europe) is the low context style where communication is direct and verbal communication is emphasized but no attention is paid to other factors, e.g. the environment or the inner being of the person. Many things that are obvious matters in collective cultures have to be expressed explicitly in individual cultures.[20]

In addition, Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey divide communication styles into four different pairs: *direct/indirect, elaborate/succinct, person-centered/contextual* and *instrumental/affective*. When using the direct communication style the speaker reveals his intentions directly whereas in the indirect style the speaker is giving hints to the real meaning and the listener is supposed to understand the real meaning

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[13]   Feghali 1997: 368.
[14]   Hall 1976: 17–23.
[15]   Manrai & Manrai 1995: 118.
[16]   Zaharna 1995: 251.
[17]   Harris & Moran 1987: 360.
[18]   Feghali 1997: 367.
[19]   Salo-Lee 1998: 24.
[20]   Hall 1976: 91.

from the given information. The direct communication style is more common in individual, low context cultures whereas the indirect style is more dominant in collective, high context cultures. In the indirect style, words such as "maybe", "possibly" and "probably" are used in order to express contextual clues and maintain mutual harmony. Moreover, non-verbal communication plays an important role, the listener is expected to follow and observe the facial expressions and gestures of the other.[21] However, it is important to stress that these communication styles are represented in every culture and the use of them varies depending on the context. In any case, one certain style might be emphasized depending on the situation.[22]

In the Arabic language there is an indirect communication code called *musayra* that is an essential part of communicating among the Arabs.[23] It means adjusting your own communication to the other; it is a combination of delicate manners and accommodating oneself to the other – saving face is mutually essential, using *musayra* reflects the need for harmonized social relationships. *Musayra* is controlled by social structures: the person lower in the hierarchy uses *musayra* towards the one who is higher, the younger to the older and the woman to the man.[24] This viewpoint supports Cohen's view that western culture is a guilt-culture where saving one's own face is important while the Arab culture is a shame-culture in which mutual face saving is significant.[25]

The elaborate communication style is typical of Middle Eastern cultures. The use of language is rich: metaphors, proverbs and idioms are widely used. By contrast, the succinct style consists of pauses and silence; close to this is the exacting style used in America and in northern Europe where only the necessary is said and nothing more. Cross-cultural communication conflicts are most likely to occur between those using the elaborate and exacting style. The Finnish communication style is placed close to exacting and succinct style.[26]

Exaggeration in speech combined with the elaborate communication style is the best way for mutual face saving; this is achieved by using *musayra*, i.e. adjusting your hopes and needs to the other. In contrast, low context cultures, which accept uncertainty well, tend to encounter new situations as challenges and do not emphasize mutual face saving but appreciate more the integrity of the communication.[27] According to Samovar and Porter, an Arab uses one hundred words to describe something while his American colleague uses only ten.[28] Almaney and Alwan, as well as Shouby, were examining reassurance (ar. *tawkid*) and exaggeration (ar.

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[21] Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988: 100–116.
[22] Salo-Lee 1998: 37.
[23] In classical Arabic, *musayara* 'assimilation, adaptation'.
[24] Katriel 1986: 111–113.
[25] Cohen 1987: 29.
[26] Salo-Lee 1988: 41.
[27] Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988: 107–108.
[28] Samovar & Porter 2000: 147.

mubalagha) and they detected that in the Arab culture people expect reassurance and argumentation in almost all communication. If an Arab says precisely and accurately what he thinks the others may think he means just the opposite, e.g. a plain "no" is insufficient to assure the host that the guest has had enough food but he has to reassure his host by following the linguistic tradition of repetition and say "no" several times and confirm this with various oaths and affirmations. For this reason it might be difficult for an Arab to believe that those using a different communication style can really mean what they say.[29] As the reason for the development of the elaborate communication style in the Arab culture, Adelman and Lustig, and also Almaney and Alwan, suggest the prohibition of making pictures of living creatures in Islam.[30] Where expressing oneself artistically has been partly suppressed, verbal communication has developed as a creative channel of expression.[31]

Cohen has noted that the Arabs seem to define most of their relationships emotionally; they even meet their possible business competitors in a brotherly way. Treatment in some other way leaves the Arabs "cold". In Arab culture, considering "personal chemistry" will not guarantee successful business negotiations but the lack of it can make life more complicated.[32] The Arabs also use the emotional way in business negotiations – it is typical for high context cultures with a polychronic time concept to create long-term personal relationships. For this reason the Arabs are willing to compromise during the negotiation process.[33]

What actually happens when people from different cultures work together every day in the same organization? How should the organization operate with its multicultural workforce? According to Adler, the benefits of dissimilarities culminate in the diversity of viewpoints and in the openness for new ideas as well as in increased creativity and problem solving skills. By contrast, the disadvantages appear as a general confusion and difficulties in defining meanings and homogenous working methods. It is crucial for the multicultural team members to gain mutual confidence in each other – in relationship-oriented cultures (i.e. in the Middle East and southern Europe) the team members spend relatively more time becoming

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[29]   Almaney & Alwan 1982: 83–84; Shouby 1951: 701.
[30]   "While I was with Ibn 'Abbas a man came and said, 'O father of 'Abbas! My sustenance is from my manual profession and I make these pictures.' Ibn 'Abbas said, 'I will tell you only what I heard from Allah's Apostle صلّى الله عليه و سلم. I heard him saying, "Whoever makes a picture will be punished by Allah till he puts life in it, and he will never be able to put life in it."' Hearing this, that man heaved a sigh and his face turned pale. Ibn 'Abbas said to him, 'What a pity! If you insist on making pictures I advise you to make pictures of trees and any other unanimated objects.'" Hadith – Bukhari 3:428, Narrated Said bin Abu Al-Hasan: (http://muttaqun.com/pictures.html).
[31]   Adelman & Lustig 1981: 352; Almaney & Alwan 1982: 79.
[32]   Cohen 1987: 41.
[33]   Hall 1976: 113; 1983: 66; Adler 1997: 190.

acquainted with each other than in northern Europe.[34] In international business negotiations, mutual communication succeeds best when the parties represent the same hierarchy level, i.e. both have the power to make decisions.[35] In cultures that have large power distance connected to strong uncertainty avoidance, as in the Arab countries, the dominant organizational model in work societies is a so-called human pyramid where the concentration of power is supported and the manager is at the top of the hierarchy. In cultures of small power distance connected to strong uncertainty avoidance, like Finland, consultative work methods are supported and the ideal organization model is like a well-oiled machine.[36] In high context cultures the ones in power are responsible for the doings of their subordinates whereas in low context cultures the responsibility is spread to the whole organization.[37]

The arguments of conflict situations in low context cultures are based on linear logic whereas in high context cultures the whole conflict situation is a cumulative process. Face in low context cultures is seen more as an interchangeable commodity that is a one-time event between the parties. In high context cultures face is connected to psychological structures of honor, shame and responsibility, including family members, relatives and friends. In low context cultures face is a relatively free concept whereas in high context cultures it reflects the status, role and power of the individual in the hierarchy. In a conflict situation the direct style in low context cultures is preferred whereas the indirect style in high context cultures represents good taste and discretion.[38] In collective cultures the word "no" is seldom used, as the direct way of handling conflict situations is not the desirable way. A more polite way of rejection could be, e.g. expressions like "you might be right" or "we will think about it".[39] In intercultural negotiations it is crucial to have excellent situational sensitivity; considering both sides is essential. A skilled negotiator succeeds in rejecting the proposal without rejecting the other as a person. The objective is to create a cultural synergy where the parties' differences are used in creating new solutions and at the same time showing respect to both cultures.[40] The dissimilarities of methods are perceived but not ranked. It is important to understand and respect the customs and viewpoints of the other culture but this does not mean approving of them. Role switching is a good method of practicing this.[41]

What are the requirements for an ideal expatriate? Kealey and Protheroe cite the saying "you are born to be a good expatriate" in which case there would not be much use for cultural training. For practical reasons many companies still

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[34] Adler 1997: 129–141.
[35] Adler 1997: 191–193; Hofstede 1993: 322.
[36] Hofstede 1993: 205–207.
[37] Hall 1976: 113; 1983: 66; Adler 1997: 190.
[38] Ting-Toomey 1988: 224–228.
[39] Hofstede 1993: 88.
[40] Adler 1997: 116–126, 193–205.
[41] Adler 1997: 84–113.

build their selection process only on technical know-how and do not invest in training but emphasize the number of international assignments.[42] According to Kealey, previous assignments abroad do not necessarily guarantee a successful one next time.[43] Suutari and Brewster share Kealy's view after examining Finnish expatriates who thought that previous assignments did not affect the fact that they were reselected. After all, Finns seem to be quite suitable expatriates: modesty and self-sufficiency have traditionally been admired features in Finnish culture, and the need for constant feedback is also less than in other cultures.[44] According to Hofstede, learning the local language is a basic requirement for deeper intercultural understanding. The learning process normally requires full-time studies though and the employer is not necessarily ready for this kind of investment.[45]

ONE-DIMENSIONAL, NEUTRAL AND MULTI-DIMENSIONAL THINKING

The study was carried out as an inquiry using a half-structured questionnaire consisting of questions concerning general information about expatriates' background, cultural training and their own experiences about working in the Arab world. The intent was to compare the results between the two main groups: those who had been offered predeparture culture training and those who were not offered any training. If training was not offered, was it seen as a necessary part of respondents' life? What kind of training was needed? Concerning working life, my object was to find out similarities and dissimilarities in the predominant local time concept, work ethic and logic compared to those of Finland. What were the things Finns had difficulties in adjusting to and what things were considered easy to adapt and adjust to? How was the intercultural manager-subordinate relationship seen? How were potential conflicts solved? Last but not least, the respondents were asked what issues they saw as important and essential in the training process designed for expatriates working in the Arab world.

   It was quite natural for me to use the existing contacts I already had in Egypt, as there was no statistical material about people who have gained work experience in the Arab world. The Embassy of Finland in Cairo delivered a list of several Finnish companies operating in Egypt and in other Arab League states. I started collecting the data in 1999 by contacting the managers of the companies in order to reach as many qualified expatriates as possible. I sent one copy of the questionnaire form to the companies and they copied it in the required numbers. I did not have much influence on the process of selecting the informants because the questionnaire form spread

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[42]   Kealey & Protheroe 1996: 142–144.
[43]   Kealey 1989: 387.
[44]   Suutari & Brewster 2001: 560–563.
[45]   Hofstede 1993: 305–331.

from one expatriate to others in a snowball effect. Due to this fact the response rate was difficult to define. I received 28 filled-out questionnaire forms in 1999 and after that five persons returned the form during the years 2000–2003. In 1999 in Egypt, during my fieldwork period, 16 expatriates filled out the questionnaire form. Forty-nine expatriates returned the form; five were excluded because they did not meet the requirements I had framed for the research. A total of 44 questionnaires were finally accepted for closer study. Over 90% of the respondents represented Finnish technical and project-export companies like YIT, Rakennus Oy Lemminkäinen, Jaakko Pöyry, Projekti-insinöörit, Suunnittelukeskus and Projektikonsultit. Most of the respondents, especially in Egypt, worked in managerial positions in various infrastructure development projects, such as sanitation, water supply and sewage projects.

On the questionnaire form there were both open and closed questions hence qualitative and quantitative methods were used when analyzing the answers. Men formed the majority of the subjects (86.4%). One-third of the respondents had been offered cultural training before leaving for international assignment. A typical respondent was a 45–50 year old male engineer, married with three children and living in the Greater Helsinki area. A typical time for the assignment was 1-6 months, repeated several times. In the average case no predeparture cultural training was offered and the most common countries for assignments were Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Those expatriates who had been offered cultural training had a clearly more positive image of their target country than those who were not offered any training. Evidently, culture training appears to have increased the knowledge and necessary realistic information about the destination country.

The time concept – especially in working life – including prearranged meetings, negotiations and putting plans into practice, seemed to be the factor that caused most of the difficulties for the Finnish expatriates. As a rule, the meetings were late and as a result the next meetings were also late. According to the respondents the locals did not care about the fixed timetables and sensed hurrying things as pressuring. The lack of planning and systematic working style was experienced as very annoying. Though some respondents stated that the time concept in the public sector differed from the western one, in the private sector there was a resemblance to the European time system. The Finnish work ethic, including accuracy, industriousness and taking initiatives, was not very well realized in the Arab world. Many respondents quoted the saying *mumkin bukra inshallah* ('maybe tomorrow, if it is God's will'). This saying describes well how the Finns saw the work ethic in the Arab countries. According to the respondents, the working style of the locals was ineffective and they were always ready to postpone something that was important to the Finns to be taken care of immediately. The level of education was not particularly high among the locals and this caused defects with documentation and planning. On the other hand, some of the respondents stated that the reasons for these differences

could also be individual, not always cultural. The locals needed constant guidance and supervision so the independent working method that was familiar to the Finns did not work in the Arab countries. Cause-and-effect-based thinking seemed to be strange in the Arab world and it seemed that the locals were living more in the present.

Eighty percent of the respondents detected differences in meeting behavior in the Arab counties compared to the Finnish system. Arranging organized meetings was considered difficult because people came in and went out freely, mobile phones were kept on, minutes were taken only occasionally and nobody seemed to be prepared for the meeting. The participants jumped from one thing to another and even simultaneous meetings, which had nothing to do with the original subject, were developed. According to the respondents the lack of western meeting behavior technique was considered extremely disturbing. No decisions were made since nobody was willing to take the responsibility. Adapting to the local society was also considered quite difficult; about 50% were frustrated by the bureaucracy and slowness of the public sector. According to the Finnish expatriates, the manager-subordinate relationship in the Arab countries was also considered difficult and slow because of the bureaucratic and authoritarian leadership method. The power is concentrated to a few people and this prevents dividing the responsibility. The local manager was seen more as a dictator than a democrat. Two-thirds of the respondents had detected or experienced conflict situations, mainly concerning different working methods. Social skills played a remarkable role in solving the problems. Over half of the respondents had encountered various language difficulties, which mainly emerged from the fact that English was used as a project language. Although both parties were using the same language, misunderstanding evolved because words were used with different meanings. One respondent commented: "*English* is not the same in every corner of the world." The major part of the misunderstandings were caused by language difficulties; many respondents wished that they could have known even a little Arabic; just knowing the basics would have helped everyday life substantially.

Finally, three main groups were created from the respondents according to their way of thinking: one-dimensional thinkers (slightly less than one-third), neutral thinkers (more than one-third) and multi-dimensional thinkers (slightly less than one-third). Neutrals formed the largest group; the differences appeared when comparing the ones who were offered predeparture cultural training to those who were not. One-dimensional thinkers and neutrals consisted mostly of those who were not offered any training. The one-dimensional thinkers had kept their own cultural attitudes and applied them even in the new cultural surroundings. They expressed critical, even judgmental opinions towards their new living environment. The actions of the local people were frequently an issue of irritation. Many of them were newcomers and still in the first stage of culture shock, when the codes of the

new culture are not yet mastered and the adaptation process is still incomplete. The neutrals appeared to be outsiders and in-betweens, more like observers. They rather withdrew from the inconvenient situations and accepted them as they were. They expressed neutral but relevant statements of the new culture without any deeper reflections attached. Frequently the neutrals had accepted the assignment abroad solely for the work itself. The multi-dimensional thinkers consisted of people with emotional intelligence. They understood that they were watching the new culture through their own frames of reference. They respected the new and strange but did not necessarily accept it all; they had the ability to see the invisible underlying factors behind the issues. While they also made critical remarks, they also considered the viewpoints of the opposing side; they made comparisons between the cultures but did not list them in order from best to worst. For them, it was important to respect the strange manners, but not to accept them. Many had been in the Arab world for several years so it could be supposed that they were in the last stages of culture shock. The idea of cultural synergy was evidently realized in this group.

The offered training was in general organized by the employer or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Cultural issues were emphasized in the training; over 90% of the material dealt with customs and manners, and the importance of religion. In addition to these, the respondents considered social skills, respect for others, cooperation, right attitude, calmness, patience and the ability to solve problems extremely significant when they were asked about the predeparture training they themselves would have preferred.

CONCLUSIONS

The object of this study was to determine how Finnish employees on international assignments in the Arabic-Islamic culture area encounter working in the Arab world. A closer look was taken at the factors that cause conflicts in working life, although in general working life is closely linked with personal life, at least in the Arab world. The research findings indicate that cultural training increases objective and realistic information about the Arab world. Even though the collected data were relatively limited, and therefore no exhaustive generalizations can be delivered, there is a clear indication of the need for predeparture cultural training for people accepting assignments in the Arab world. The lack of information arose mainly in the answers from the expatriates who were not offered any cultural training before leaving for the assignment. Cultural training appears to influence the attitude towards new situations in the unfamiliar culture – the knowledge of the existing conditions enabled expectations and the real world to meet. In general, the results from the respondents who were not offered any training were reversed compared to the answers of those who were offered predeparture training.

A major part of the cross-cultural conflict situations were caused by the different time concept, which was closely linked with other elements such as the way of thinking and work ethic. Different working styles were also a reason for work-related conflicts between Finnish expatriates and the local employees. The conflicts were solved by discussions and by explaining the cause-and-effect relations and sometimes by using a mediator. The predominant societal system in the Arab world reflected itself as a microcosm of the working-life environment; the Finnish democratic leadership and decision-making style was not suitable in the Arab countries where traditionally strong autocratic managers are preferred.

According to the attitude towards the unfamiliar culture, the respondents formed three different but rather even categories based on their thinking: one-dimensional, neutral and multi-dimensional thinkers. The one-dimensional thinkers were easily annoyed and eagerly criticized the new culture and its ways of handling things; in general they were newcomers. The neutrals took the role of outsiders and they did not express their opinions easily. The multi-dimensional thinkers were profound speculators who were able to compare the cultures without ranking them; they usually had had several long assignments. They were genuinely interested in new people and different things; they respected the unfamiliar but did not necessarily accept it. The three groups were relatively even: a little more than one-third of neutrals, a little less than one-third of one-dimensional and multi-dimensional thinkers. The differences emerged when comparing the culturally trained ones to those with no training at all. Multi-dimensional thinkers and neutrals were found mainly in the trained group whereas the one-dimensional thinkers and neutrals fell into the non-trained group. However, the time spent in the Arab world appears to mould the expatriate's way of thinking towards appreciation of multiculturalism more than the received predeparture cultural training: over 70% of the expatriates with the most work experience in the Arab world were not offered any training. Nevertheless, in addition to the realistic and objective attitude achieved, culture training appears to save time – an issue that is highly appreciated in the Western world.

The research findings strongly support Hofstede's theories about the cultural dimensions and Hall's theories about different time concepts. Finnish expatriates seem to adapt unexpectedly well to the Arab World, even though a priori my expectations were on a slightly lower level. When analyzing the answers, my attention was caught by the flexibility and calmness of the respondents: when a conflict situation occurred, after an outburst of stronger feelings, the Finns handled the situation with calm and controlled action. Knowing why things are done in a certain way helps one to adjust to different situations in a mature way. One expatriate commented: "Everything is adjustable when the reasons for certain actions are explained."

With the right kind of predeparture culture training the different courses of action are better realized and in this manner an understanding towards cultural diversity is achieved and also the basic pillars of society – authentic interest towards other human beings, respect and consideration for other people – can grow in mutual harmony, creating a fruitful soil for cooperation and companionship. The research findings indicate that both the expatriate and the employer benefit from predeparture cultural training, in particular when examining the issue from the time perspective.

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