

# Intercultural Knowledge Management

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**Abstract:** The scope of intercultural knowledge is the study of the differences between the national and foreign cultures. This paper's main objectives are to understand how employees assigned internationally perceive the cultural differences they are faced with, the factors which influence intercultural adjustment during an international assignment and with what type of support they are provided in their home companies. Admittedly, cultural differences between home and host countries could negatively impact the success of international assignments inasmuch as the former may create a set of barriers which expatriates need to overcome. Thus, this study also examines how organisations could develop their employees' cross-cultural competencies by means of their intercultural knowledge management practices. A total of forty-five semi-structured interviews with Portuguese international assignees (26 in Angola; 19 in United Arab Emirates), who were immersed in the host country culture for at least six months, allowed for a qualitative approach to data collection. Results from collected data suggest the process of intercultural adaptation of Portuguese assignees to the Angolan and United Arab Emirates context is not standard. On the one hand, the results emphasize the fact that there are (1) contextual factors; (2) idiosyncratic factors and; (3) factors of an organisational nature. These are the main types of factors which help explaining why international assignees find intercultural adjustment difficult. On the other hand, the study suggests that organisations should take heed of intercultural knowledge management practices which facilitate their future international assignees' intercultural adjustment. Most assignees consider the organisational support insufficient. We discuss theoretical and practical implications of the intercultural management process, and explore avenues for future research.

**Keywords:** international knowledge management, intercultural adjustment, cultural distance, international assignment

## 1. Introduction and background

The international expansion of organizations as a response to the new challenges of the current competitive market has expanded the frequency, depth and breadth of intercultural interactions. According to Craide and Silva (2012:113), "it is in Europe, where people are more used to cross geographical and linguistic borders, mainly from the unification of the countries in a European Community". In particular, the internationalization of companies based in Portugal, as well as the consequent expatriation of Portuguese, has become an increasingly growing reality in the Portuguese business community (Martins, 2013). Therefore, there are a set of challenges to address in the management of intercultural knowledge, namely related to cultural differences and management models of cultural values between home and host countries (Camara et al., 2013).

Difficulties are not only felt by the organization, but also by the expatriates who are sent to international missions, where they are crucial agents to the success of the international assignments (López & Prieto, 2005). Expatriates face several barriers in the host country related with the job environment as well as with the society environment. These barriers are related with different rules and norms inherent to the job environment, isolation, homesickness, differences in housing, language, traditions and living costs (Chang, 1997). Therefore, it is important to expatriates to adapt to the cultural differences between home and host country for international mission to succeed (Ramalu et al., 2010).

Several authors (e.g. Black et al., 1991; Hofstede, 1998; Martins, 2013) shows that during the international mission, expatriates are exposed to a new culture, often different from the one they are used to, facing new values, behaviours and traditions that can lead them to a sense of apprehension and nervousness. In this sense, it is important that international companies realize the need to develop organizational support practices that can facilitate the adaptation of their expatriates to the culture of a new country, avoiding the so-called "culture shock" (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Kubo & Braga, 2013). Recently, Wang and Varma (2017) affirmed that expatriate assignments can be very challenging, especially in countries that are culturally

distinct from the expatriates' home country, and consequently the cultural distance between the expatriate's home country and the host country, greater will be the difficulties that the expatriate will experience. The same authors, Wang and Varma (2017), noted that literature had few studies analysing the specific support provided by organisations and in the role that organisations play in moderating the expatriates' intercultural adjustment. One the other hand, any current level of adjustment may follow a recent drop or increase in adjustment and the expatriate may expect adjustment to continue to fall or increase further (Hippler et al., 2015:1921). For instance, two expatriates displaying identical current levels of adjustment, one might perceive himself or herself as being on a downward slope, whereas for the other, things are getting better all the time. For one, the current level of adjustment marks a negative change, and for the other it signifies a positive one. It should thus come as no surprise that the direction of change has an important and unique impact on attitudinal or performance outcomes (Hippler et al., 2015:1921). Researches claim that between 10 to 45% of the western expatriates return to their home country before time (Martins & Tomé, 2015). The main difficulties is related to Intercultural adjustment difficulties (Black et al., 1999).

According to the Brookfield GRS report (2015), Angola ranks 14th in the ranking of emerging destinations for expatriation. In addition, according to the same report (Brookfield GRS, 2015), Angola is one of the countries that present the greatest challenges for international missions, ranking 16th because of social problems, security and delay and bureaucratic entry visa process. In turn, due to its hybrid nature, Middle Eastern organizations have unique characteristics, in part, influenced by the incursion of expatriates from a wide number of foreign countries. Through expatriates, nowadays there is a great cultural diversity in the Middle East, demanding management strategies resulting from this diversity, without compromising the organizational success (Leitão, 2014). The United Arab Emirates (UAE) have very distinct characteristics, while being seen as an opportunity market, an open economy, a high GDP per capita and a growth estimate of 4.7% in 2014, Middle East will arouse the interest of a growing number of Portuguese companies in this market (Leitão, 2014).

The current study attempts to explore what factors could influence the intercultural adjustment during an international assignment. We compare these factors in two different groups of expatriates. One group integrate 26 expatriates in Angola and another group integrate expatriates in UAE, although both groups are contemporary in terms of expatriation experience time (all participants start their international assignment after March 2015).

The main objectives of the paper are (1) to understand how employees assigned internationally perceive the cultural differences they are faced with, (2) the factors which influence intercultural adjustment during an international assignment and (3) with what type of support they are provided in their home companies.

The paper is structured as follows. In next section we present the methodology (section 2), the results (section 3) and we discuss the main results together with limitation identified and some future developments for further relevant research.

## **2. Methodology**

This study was conducted according to the interpretative research paradigm, based on the content analysis method. To collect the information, it was used a semi-structured interview. This semi-structured interview had three groups of questions, one related to interviewees' characterization, other related to the factors which influence intercultural adjustment during an international assignment, and the last related to type of support they are provided in their home companies. All of them were open-ended questions allowing the participant to explain his point of view.

### **2.1 Participants**

Forty-Five Portuguese expatriates were interviewed (aged 36 in average, twenty-eight male). The vast majority of the expatriates has a university degree (38 expatriates). When they were interviewed, twenty-four were expatriates and twenty-one were repatriates less than one year ago. Twenty-Six Portuguese international assignees carried out their international assignment in Angola (26 interviewees) and United Arab Emirates (7 in Kuwait, 2 in Oman, 3 in Qatar, 3 in Dubai, 2 Saudi Arabia and 2 in Bahrain).

## 2.2 Procedure and data analysis

In order to answer the objectives of the study, the procedure adopted followed several phases, and data collection and analysis occurred from March 2016 to July 2017. In the first phase, we sent an e-mail with the objectives of the study trying to evaluate the availability to integrate the study and to conduct a semi-structure interview. The objective of this semi-structured interview was to interview expatriates and recent repatriates, creating a more informal conversation, but focusing in the topic of the study. It should be noted that was also developed an informed consent document to all the study participants to sign. Six interviews had to be carried out by skype because these expatriates did not come to Portugal during the time of data collection. The average duration of each interview was about 40 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded. Confidentiality was granted to interviewees. The next phase involved the treatment and analysis of the information collected according to content analysis method. Subsequently, a frequency analysis of the thematic categories was carried out, as well as a qualitative analysis of the data. To ensure the validity of the analysis and the coding process, two researchers were consulted as auditors (independent researchers that discuss and validate the categories) throughout the entire data analysis process to assist the primary author by challenging ideas and assisting in the construction of the categories. The main results are presented in next section.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Facilitating and blocking factors in intercultural adjustment

Generally, the expatriates interviewed (see Table 1) identified a total of 9 facilitating factors of intercultural adjustment during the international mission (where 8 are referred as facilitators of intercultural adjustment of Portuguese expatriates in Angola and 5 were identified as facilitators of intercultural adjustment of Portuguese expatriates in UAE) and 18 blocking factors of the intercultural adjustment of expatriates during their international missions (12 factors contribute to inhibit the intercultural adjustment in Angola and 9 factors made intercultural adjustment difficult in UAE).

**Table 1:** Factors which influence intercultural adjustment during an international assignment

Angola		United Arab Emirates	
Facilitating factors	Blocking factors	Facilitating factors	Blocking factors
Language (22)	Language (3)	Language (11)	Language (2)
Support from co-workers and the Portuguese community (21)		Support from co-workers and the Portuguese community (2)	
	Climate (4)		Climate (7)
Gastronomy (19)			Gastronomy (8)
Positive attitude towards expatriation (11)		Positive attitude towards expatriation (8)	
Ease of communication with the home country (6)		Ease of communication with the home country (8)	
Monetary transactions (6)	Monetary transactions (7)		
	Insecurity (24)	Security (12)	
Lifestyle (9)			
	Cost of living (4)		
	Corruption (10)		
	Missing family and friends (11)		
	Traffic (14)		
	Professional Inefficiency of the Autochthonous (15)		
	Bureaucracy (2)		
	Hygiene and health conditions (18)		
	Insufficient services (6)		
			Religious differences (16)
			Political differences (3)
			Cultural differences (9)
			Labour Regime (8)
			Clothing (3)

**Legend:** in front of each factor is identified the number of references

The main facilitator of the intercultural adjustment of Portuguese expatriates, both the Angolan culture and the culture of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), was the language (identified by 22 expatriates in Angola and 11 expatriates in the UAE): *"To speak the same language is halfway through"* (Interviewee 14, expatriate in Angola) and *"English is the first language in business and in everyday life the whole population speaks English. In this way, language was not a barrier to integrate"* (Interviewee 33, expatriate in UAE).

Country security was the factor that, in inverse reason more influenced the intercultural adjustment of the expatriates. For one side, it were noted as main facilitator factor of the intercultural adjustment of UAE (referred by 12 of the 19 expatriates): *"...Kuwait is an extremely safe country with, for example, crime rates far below Portugal, which in itself already has relatively low crime rates"* (Interviewee 37, expatriate in UAE). In the other side, this was the factor mentioned by the expatriates of Angola that made intercultural adjustment more difficult (mentioned by 24 of the 26 expatriates of this Country): *"All the people were armed with weapons, so I was very amazed. I've never seen so many armed people in my life. (...). In the first few days I ignored it, but then we had a very dangerous situation. We were robbed at home, killed the security guard, shot a colleague of ours and then I feared a bit for security. There was a second attempt of robbery ... Things got uglier and I thought seriously about leaving, but I ended up staying."* (Interviewee 13, expatriate in Angola).

In turn, gastronomy was another of the identified factors that, in an inverse way, influenced the intercultural adjustment of the expatriates. On the other hand, it was identified as the main facilitating factor for the intercultural adjustment of expatriates in Angola (mentioned by 19 of the 26 expatriates). It was also the factor mentioned by the UAE expatriates that most difficulties arises to the intercultural adjustment (referred by 8 in a total of 19 expatriates of this country): *"The gastronomy is not my specialty considering that I do not like spicy food or with flavors of "curry""* (Interviewee 34, expatriate in UAE).

There were identified 4 common factors that facilitate the intercultural adjustment of Portuguese expatriates, both in international missions in Angola and in UAE (language, support from co-workers, positive attitude towards expatriation, ease of communication with the country of origin): *"... Angolans speak Portuguese as we speak Portuguese, that is, communication is very facilitated."* (Interviewee 4, expatriate in Angola); *"The support of colleagues in the same situation facilitated my integration"* (Interviewee 4, expatriate in Angola); *"Open mind, understanding and acceptance of cultures and traditions of other countries"* (Interviewee 35, expatriate in UAE) and *"having Internet helped a lot, being able to talk with family and friends through Skype, WhatsApp"* (Interviewee 38, expatriate in UAE).

Among the common factors that made intercultural adjustment difficult for Portuguese expatriates in both destinations were the language and the climate, as shown by the testimonies of some expatriates: *"In the language I felt differences. They have a lot of slang so you do not understand what they are saying. (...) And a lot of people tell me that I speak very fast (...) that I have a very northern accent (...). We were all speaking the same language, but we had some difficulties in this"* (Interviewee 15, expatriate in Angola); *"Language was undoubtedly the biggest obstacle because, if you knew a little Arabic, it would facilitate many meetings and many contacts"* (Interviewee 29, expatriate in UAE); *"To the weather ... in the first 3 days, I suffered a lot. Too much heat, too much humidity. The humidity makes me feel less strong. I tire faster"* (Interviewee 2, expatriate in Angola); *"In summer it is extremely hot. From June to September the maximum temperature is 50 degrees or more"* (Interviewee 37, expatriate in UAE).

Finally, 4 factors facilitating the intercultural adjustment of Portuguese expatriates in an international mission in Angola were not identified by colleagues whose destination was the UAE (climate, gastronomy, lifestyle, and monetary transactions): *"The weather is the best thing in Angola, it is Spring / Summer all year round!"* (Interviewee 21, expatriate in Angola); *"Adapt to Angolan food was very good. (...) the food is the same as we do in Portugal, almost everything, the same dishes, here the supermarkets have the same products that we consume in Portugal. We bought everything the same. There is not so much difference"* (Interviewee 11, expatriate in Angola); *"... when I get Friday night, I closed the computer and from Friday to Sunday and it was party, beach, surf, and that was all."* (Interviewee 2, expatriate in Angola); *"... as it was 1 euro, 100 kwanzas, it was very easy to make the exchange. (...) the money is all in the street and it is in the street that we exchanged euros to three hundred and such kwanzas. 1 euro is already worth 3 times more than when I came here [Angola] (...). That is, our purchasing power has increased 3 times."* (Interviewee 2, expatriate in Angola). In turn, only

security was identified as facilitating intercultural adjustment in the UAE, but not identified as facilitating the intercultural adjustment of expatriates in Angola, according to an expatriate: "...Dubai is considered one of the safest countries in the world, even though it is geographically close to the conflict zones of the Middle East" (Interviewee 33, expatriate in UAE).

In turn, 10 factors were referred as specific difficulties to the intercultural adjustment of Portuguese expatriates on an international mission in Angola (living costs, monetary transactions, traffic, insecurity, corruption, family and friends' homesickness, lack of professional skills, bureaucracy, conditions hygiene and health, insufficient services): *"After a month, forget, it's not worth it (...), it's the second most expensive city in the world"* (Interviewee 1, expatriate in Angola); *"It made me confused to go to the supermarket in the 1st week and see that some yogurts cost 4 euros. (...)"* (Interviewee 15, expatriate in Angola); *"the country is going through a major financial crisis, there is no foreign exchange for companies to make transfers ... I am currently 4 months of salary arrears ..."* (Interviewee 8, expatriate in Angola); *"Angolan banks are bankrupt, do not have money"* (Interviewee 22, expatriate in Angola); *"Often, on a daily basis, to leave home for work, to make short journeys, even because of the traffic and organization of the city, doing 2 or 3 kms would take 2 or 3 hours. This was very difficult and required us to have our schedules very well organized"* (Interviewee 6, expatriate in Angola); *"...the most negative impact was, at the weekend, being involved in a robbery. (...) It is all more insecure (than in Portugal), without a doubt, nor can be questioned, is much more insecure."* (Interviewee 11, expatriate in Angola); *"... corruption is everywhere. Everything works crusader and I always put myself apart from these negotiations. (...) The police are corrupt. Whenever you have to pay. So either it's the paper or it's badly folded, it does not matter (...). I have to pay."* (Interviewee 2, expatriate in Angola); *"(...) Today I say that the experience was very costly in familiar terms. (...) Everybody suffered much more than if we were all here [Portugal]"* (Interviewee 16, expatriate in Angola); *"Another difficulty was also related to the lack of productivity felt (...). Co-workers often lost efficiency"* (Interviewee 3, expatriate in Angola); *"The visa bureaucracy is a serious problem that Angola has to solve ..."* (Interviewee 1, expatriate in Angola); *"Hygiene is one of the worst aspects of Angola. You can not wear sandals because it's too dirty, it's rubbish, it's dust, it's sand, it's sewage everywhere, it's complicated. There is a very serious problem still to be resolved that has to do with basic sanitation. (...) the garbage ends up being, perhaps, a week without being collected and this generates very serious problems in the hygiene level"* (Interviewee 25, expatriate in Angola); *"There is no water. There is no light. You constantly have to send a lorry, you have to buy gasoil, diesel to put in a generator. There are no accountants, we always pay the same thing of light (...). We are bathing and we must always be worried if there is water in the tank, see if the next day or call someone. (...) Health, beyond insecurity, is the great fear of anyone. If you have a heart attack there is no ambulance! You have one or two, but to get the ambulance ..."* (Interviewee 3, expatriate in Angola).

As specifically blocking the intercultural adjustment of Portuguese expatriates in the UAE, respondents identified 6 factors (gastronomy, religious differences, political differences, cultural differences, labor regime and clothing): *"the most felt restrictions are the fact that alcohol, pork ..., are not allowed"* (Interviewee 37, expatriate in UAE); *"the religion can be pointed out as one of the great factors that limits certain conducts, that in other countries are accepted"* (Interviewee 33, expatriate in UAE); *"the country's policy is closed, and it can not be questioned. We hear stories of people being massacred by questioning government decisions or protests, yet I have never seen anything extravagant"* (Interviewee 34, expatriate in UAE); *"adapt to the way people relate with each other and how they do business, because even if it is an American company, the predominant culture in the same was Arab and at times I had very difficult to transpose what the company wanted ..."* (Interviewee 45, expatriate in UAE); *"the difficulties I believe have to do more with work issues ... The pace of work here is different from ours. Everything can stay until tomorrow. The notion of responsibility is very different ..."* (Interviewee 42, expatriate in UAE); *"the fact of not being able to walk dressed like in Portugal became very complicated. For me it was the hardest things to adapt"* (Interviewee 40, expatriate in UAE).

### **3.2 Organisational support**

Portuguese companies tend to provide more organizational support during the international mission to expatriates whose international mission is in Angola than to those who go on an international mission to the UAE (see Table 2).

Among expatriates in Angola, all benefited from organizational support at the level of accommodation and driver or car for travel (26 expatriates), and their costs were fully supported by the home company. The home company also incurred charges for the household during the stay (11 expatriates), with food, usually in the canteen of the

host country (9 expatriates), with health insurance (16 expatriates), trips to Portugal (17 expatriates). Another type of support provided was the existence of a pocket money (7 expatriates) that allows the management of a monthly amount for daily expenses, as indicated by two expatriates: *"The company guarantees the transportation, the car, the housing, the daily maid, guarantees the household utensils, 3 trips to Portugal per year, health insurance, (...) In my case, a Pocket Money is given for food..."* (Interviewee 10, expatriate in Angola); *"They gave us transportation. They take us home, leave us at work and at the end of the job, they have a van that takes us home. (...) they gave us home. (...) I had a health insurance that the company offered me. (...) we had our own canteen and a maid who did the cleaning of 3 or 4 houses."* (Interviewee 22, expatriate in Angola).

**Table 2:** Type of organisational support during the international assignment

Angola	Middle Eastern Arab countries
Accommodation (26)	Accommodation (2)
Driver/car (26)	Training (2)
Food (9)	Network (1)
Housekeeper (11)	
Pocket money (7)	
Health insurance (16)	
Travel tickets to Portugal (17)	

Among expatriates to UAE, there is only organizational support by Portuguese companies at the level of accommodation (2 expatriates), cultural integration training (2 expatriates) and contact with other Portuguese colleagues who were already in the country (1 expatriate), as the following testimonies suggest: *"To be honest, little or none ... The support goes through guidelines, seminars, casual outings with other employees and the like"* (Interviewee 33, expatriate in UAE); *"home, local contacts with Portuguese and training"* (Interviewee 38, expatriate in UAE).

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The main influencing factors of intercultural adjustment of Portuguese expatriates in both countries are: the language, the support from co-workers and the Portuguese community, the climate, the gastronomy, a positive attitude towards expatriation and the Ease of communication with the home country. These results confirm the arguments of other researchers (e.g. Hofstede, 1998; Black & Gregerson, 1991; Copeland & Norell, 2002; Pereira et al., 2005; Martins & Tomé, 2015) when mentioning that linguistic aspects, cultural, economic, religious, political and social are determinant for the success of expatriation, assuming themselves as factors that interfere with the adaptation in an international mission, especially when the cultural distance between the home and host countries is bigger.

This is the first study using Portuguese expatriates in international missions in African and Asian countries that compare and contrast influencing factors of expatriate intercultural adjustment and the organizational support that Portuguese companies are investing in both countries, using expatriates to develop the Portuguese business.

Our propose was, by one side, to explore the Arabian cultural traditions and, by other hand, how the cultural differences between Continents (Africa and Asia) and the origin Continent of expatriates (Europe) can determinate the success of international missions, influenced by the capacity of intercultural adjustment of expatriates. Being the first study involving Portuguese expatriates in UAE, the results shows pioneer emphasizing the importance of its contribute in the intercultural knowledge management scope. By other side, exploring the characteristic aspects of Angolan culture is equally important for a better intercultural knowledge management by Portuguese companies, since Angola is the main destination for the internationalization of Portuguese companies outside the European Continent. Besides that, this study can also help future Portuguese expatriates having a more exact notion about the adversities and facilities they will face, if they are wondering the development an international assignment on both destinations. The results of this project confirm the relevance of studying the intercultural adjustment (McDonnell & Scullion, 2013) since it was well patent the presence of blocking factors in intercultural adjustment both to Angola culture and to UAE culture.

Furthermore, and as referred to McDonnell & Scullion (2013), the perceived support from the home and host organisation was a key determinant of adjustment. It is possible that the low organisation support from home and host organisation (for instance in terms of intercultural training) could be explain that there are more blocking factors than facilitating factors of intercultural adjustment either in Angola or in UAE. The study has

some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Those limitations, in turn, result in possibilities for further studies. Firstly, the approach adopted - in-depth interviews - precludes the generalization of the findings. Future studies should include more participants, especially organisational representatives to confirm the expatriates' perspectives in terms of organisational support given. Secondly, the results show the main types of factors which help explaining why international assignees find intercultural adjustment difficult. On the other hand, the study suggests that organisations should take heed of intercultural knowledge management practices which facilitate their future international assignees' intercultural adjustment. Future studies should explore in-depth these types of factors to understand the main facilities and intercultural adversities that can be found throughout the process of intercultural adjustment of Portuguese expatriates, allowing companies to promote intercultural knowledge management practices that facilitate their future international assignees' intercultural adjustment on both destinations (Angola and UAE).

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