

# Flexibility – As Feature and Ability in the Expatriate’s Qualification Profile

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Increased geographical mobility, cultural flexibility, adaptability to different cultural conditions are demanded the most often from expatriates, i.e. the employees sent by corporate headquarters to work in foreign subsidiaries. The goal of this article is to present the flexibility (in terms of skills and personality traits), as a component of the expatriate’s qualification profile and to present the forms of foreign assignments which are alternative to traditional expatriation (flexpatriate contracts).

**Keywords:** expatriate, flexibility, flexpatriate.

## Introduction

The dynamics of development of international enterprises and the changes in business environment induce corporations to flexibly adjust to new conditions. Increased geographical mobility, cultural flexibility, adaptability to different cultural conditions are demanded the most often from expatriates, i.e. the employees sent by corporate headquarters to work in foreign subsidiaries.

The duration of traditional expatriate assignments for managers is from 3 to 5 years. However, the economic and financial situation in recent years induces the international companies to search for alternative expatriation forms which are shorter and cheaper. The practice of management encompasses several short-term expatriate assignments (up to 12 months): rotational assignments, international commuter, frequent flyer, virtual assignments. In the literature on the subject such forms are defined as flexpatriation<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Mayrhofer, L. Hartmann, G. Michelitsch-Riedl, I. Kollinger, *Flexpatriate assignments: a neglected issues in global staffing*, “International Journal of HRM” 2004, 15(8); H. Mayrhofer, A. Muller, Schmidt A., *Implications of flexpatriates’ lifestyles on HRM practices*, „Management

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## The flexibility of human-resource management challenge and a necessity for today's corporations

Flexible management of human resources may be considered as the **process** aimed at maintaining the harmony between the available human resources and the turbulent environment, dynamically changing external conditions, and the strategic assumptions of an organisation<sup>2</sup>.

Current trends in the global economy make the multinational companies look for alternatives to long-term (3–5 years) forms of foreign contracts. The need for a flexible approach is the result of the following changes in the global business:

- Changing business relations including the bigger number of established joint ventures, licensing and different forms of contract instead of fully controlled subsidiaries or foreign branches.
- Progress in communication technologies and air transport (meaning faster data and information transfer, more comfortable and shorter travelling) expands the range of options for corporations which are not interested in investing in long-term foreign assignments of their employees.
- Increasing interest in the aspects of employees' social sphere concerning the balance between work and personal life.
- Access to global qualified labour force. Internationalisation of business activity, students' and employees' mobility and exchange programs facilitate the establishment of the base made of employees with international experience, intercultural skill sets, who will become global managers in the future<sup>3</sup>.
- The geographical area of Europe facilitates the development of alternative (short-term) expatriation forms. Europe is an area abound in diversity gathered in relatively small territory. The travel from one country to another

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Review" 2010, 21(2); *Global staffing*, Ed. H. Scullion H., D.G. Collins, Routledge, London, NY 2006; H. Harris, *Alterative forms of international working*, "Worldlink" 2000, Vol 10, No. 4.

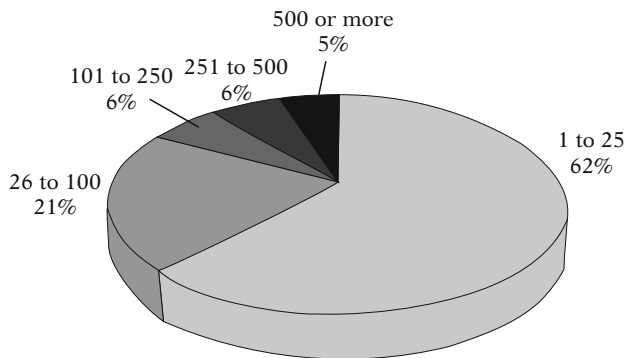
<sup>2</sup> M. Juchnowicz, A. Wojtczuk-Turek, *Elastyczne zarządzanie kapitałem ludzkim jako paradygmat nowoczesnej gospodarki*, in: *Elastyczne zarządzanie kapitałem ludzkim w organizacji wiedzy*, Ed. M. Juchnowicz, Difin, Warszawa 2007, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> H. Mayrhofer, L. Hartmann, G. Michelitsch-Riedl, I. Kollinger, *Flexpatriate assignments...*, op. cit., p. 1373.

means a difference of few hours of flight and therefore the companies locating their subsidiaries in European countries may benefit from short-term expatriation forms.

Research carried out in 44 countries in 2011 show high popularity and the growing importance of employee mobility programs. When it comes to relocation programs implemented by corporations in the last 12 months, 62% of corporations approved from 1–25 relocations, 21% approved of 26–100 movements abroad for their employees<sup>4</sup>.

Figure 1. Relocation activity in global corporations



Source: *The Forum for Expatriate Managers, Mobility Survey Report*, April 2011, p. 6.

Occupational and geographical mobility is a sign of the times today, and the flexibility is a key requirement for qualification for people working in an international environment.

## Flexibility as the most demanded qualification for expatriates

It is also possible to examine the issue of flexibility with reference to an employee and treat it as a **capability**, i.e. an ability to adapt to changes in the environment, cognitive openness, whereas psychologists consider flexibility as a **feature** which is the permanent and inborn “equipment” of an individual. It is even mentioned that there is a flexible personality<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> *The Forum for Expatriate Managers, Mobility Survey Report*, April 2011.

<sup>5</sup> A. Wojtczuk-Turek, *Elastyczność jako kluczowa kompetencja pracownika w organizacjach wiedzy*, in: *Elastyczne zarządzanie kapitałem ludzkim w organizacji wiedzy*, Ed. M. Juchnowicz, Difin, Warszawa 2007, pp. 56–66.

In the context of flexibility of human resources, it is worthwhile to mention the so-called adaptability concept formulated by M. Adamiec and based on the idea of “proper place for human possibilities”. In this concept, a man is not only a rigid and permanent structure and a blend of psychological and physical features but a human being able to display flexibility, adaptability, metamorphosis, and accommodation to new requirements and situations.

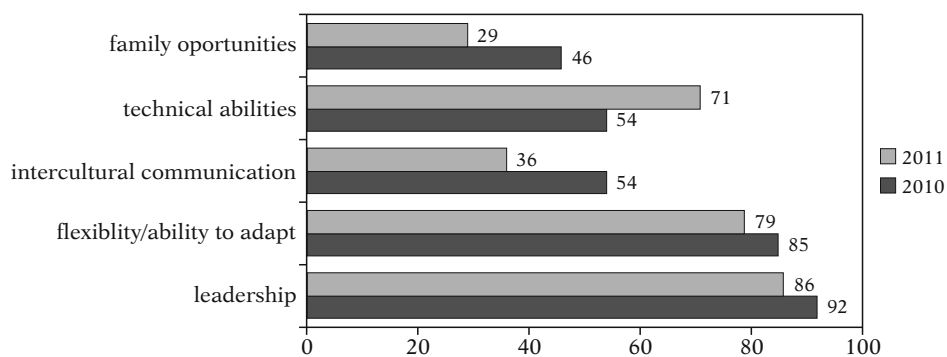
The characteristics of a flexible employee include but are not limited to the following<sup>6</sup>:

- readiness to work overtime,
- readiness to change the place of employment – within a country or abroad,
- readiness to change the job/role of the organisation,
- readiness to temporarily hold the position of another type,
- readiness to change the method of task fulfilment (e.g. telework, virtual teams).

It is possible to say that these characteristics match expatriates in every respect. The following presents several sets of qualifications required from expatriates taking up the work abroad.

According to GMAC Global Relocation Research Services, the most desirable qualifications for candidates seeking a job abroad are: leadership, flexibility, intercultural communication and technical skills (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Qualifications for expatriate position**



Source: [www.gmacglobalrelocation.com](http://www.gmacglobalrelocation.com).

<sup>6</sup> T. Rostkowski, *Mierniki elastyczności kapitału ludzkiego oraz elastycznego zarządzania kapitałem ludzkim. Metoda oceny*, in: *Elastyczne zarządzanie kapitałem ludzkim w organizacji wiedzy*, Ed. M.Juchnowicz, Difin, Warszawa 2007, p. 77.

N. Phillips emphasizes the need “to be able to function in a complex, uncertain environment, characterized by continuous change”, what means being flexible within the environment<sup>7</sup>.

Research findings of Huang T. et al<sup>8</sup> prove that there is a positive correlation between some psychological traits of the expatriate and the success of foreign assignments. In relation to Big Five<sup>9</sup> personality traits, extroversion, agreeableness, openness to experience (this trait is also defined as being flexible in adjustment to all what is different) and prior international experience are all significantly and positive correlated with adjustment to foreign culture.

W. Arthur and W. Bennett conducted the research among 338 expats and they classified 4 sets of the most important qualifications decisive in the expat's success at work: knowledge in the scope of management; flexibility/adaptability (tolerance of uncertainty, ability to listen, resistance to stress); openness to other cultures; family situation (spouse's willingness to work and live abroad, stable family situation).

The authors claim that flexibility and adaptability as well as stable family situation are the factors which are the most often indicated as predictors of expatriation success<sup>10</sup>.

J. Black and H. Gregersen list the features in expats which are mentioned by international companies as the most appreciated ones<sup>11</sup>: ability to communicate, sociability, cosmopolitan orientation and **cultural flexibility**. It is a psychological feature (in ‘Big Five’ classification according to P. Costa and R. McCrae, it is the so-called openness to new experience) which is characterised by openness to cultural diversity, willingness to experiment with other customs and ways of living than one's own. The expats who reveal the feature of cultural flexibility when working in India will surely try *dal and chapatis* for lunch, and in Japan – eat rice with algae using chopsticks and drink sake.

The results of research conducted by S. Przytuła<sup>12</sup> among the managerial staff in 34 international companies in Poland show the most important

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<sup>7</sup> N. Phillips, *Managing international teams*, Pitman, London 1992.

<sup>8</sup> T. Huang, S. Chi, J. Lawler, *The relationship between expatriates' personality traits and their adjustment to international assignments*, “International Journal of HRM” 2005, 16(9), p. 1664.

<sup>9</sup> Big Five traits: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness to experience.

<sup>10</sup> For: J. Bonache, Z. Fernandez, *Strategic staffing in multinational companies: a resource-based approach*, in: *Readings and Cases in IHRM*, Ed. M. Mendenhall, G. Oddou, Routledge, 1999.

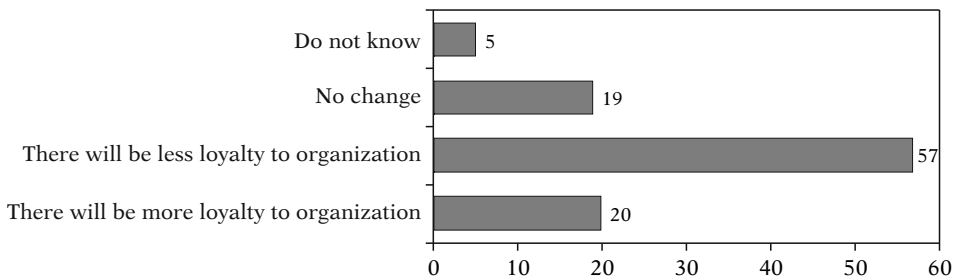
<sup>11</sup> J.S. Black, H. Gregersen, *The right way to manager expatriates*, “Harvard Business Review” (March/April) 1999, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> S. Przytuła, *Profil kwalifikacyjny menedżera międzynarodowego*, in: *Zarządzanie kadrą menedżerską w organizacjach międzynarodowych w Polsce*, Ed. T. Listwan, M. Stor, Wydawnictwo AE Wrocław 2008, p. 113.

qualifications in the scope of managing an international company in the respondents' opinion: managerial knowledge, holistic thinking, **flexibility in accepting and performing the managerial roles**, knowledge of foreign languages.

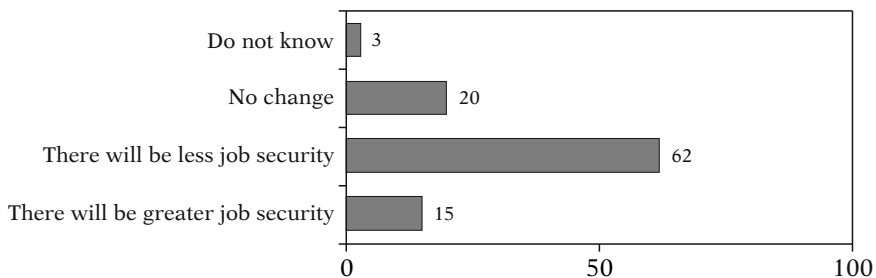
In the research conducted by *Global Firms 2020*<sup>13</sup>, almost 60% of respondents decided that the employees of international corporations in the next decade will have both international and intercultural experience. Moreover, 20% of respondents was convinced that the international employees will have to relocate between subsidiaries more often, which is the sign of their increased geographical mobility. Flexibility is also a sign of readiness to change of employer, which is associated with the level of employee loyalty to the corporation. Respondents of the research project *Global Firms 2020*, have indicated the changes in the social field of work (concerning, i.a. loyalty and a sense of stability work) that will occur in the next decade:

**Figure 3. Level of loyalty to organization in the perspective of 2020**



Source: *Global firms in 2020. The next decade of change for organization and workers*, Economist Intelligence Unit Survey, 2010, p. 27.

**Figure 4. Level of job security in the perspective of 2020**



Source: *Global firms in 2020. The next decade of change for organization and workers*, Economist Intelligence Unit Survey, 2010, p. 27.

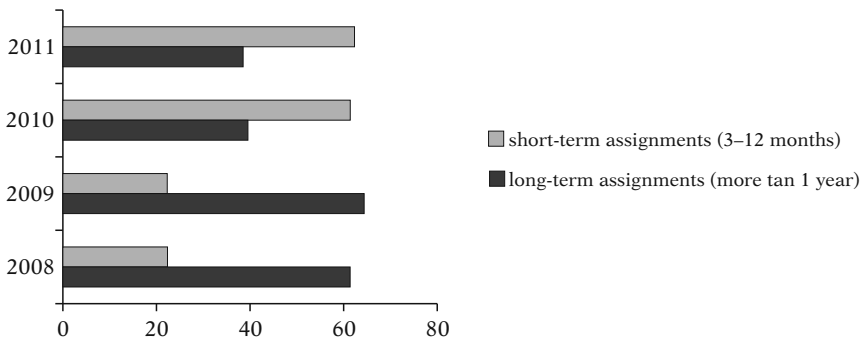
<sup>13</sup> *Global firms in 2020. The next decade of change for organization and workers*, "Economist Intelligence Unit Survey" 2010.

As is clear from the above characteristics, flexibility, a trait or ability, although defined differently by the authors, is one of the key skills of expatriates. H. Steinmann and G. Schreyogg were of similar opinion: “*the profiles of requirements should be less static and more flexible, reflecting the changes in the circumstances for undertaken activities, including qualifications which used to be unthinkable in traditional profiles*”<sup>14</sup>.

## Flexpatriate-alternative for difficult times for multinational corporations

Research over the years 2003–2011 show that the trend has changed in the length of contracts. In the years (2003–2009) more than 50% of all contracts were long-term nature (over 1 year), ten percent were short-term trips, and about 20% are one-way transfers (over 3 years and permanently). Following the financial crisis of 2009 corporations reduced the costs, mainly by reducing the number of long-term contracts, and to about 60% rise in the number of contracts of short (3–12 months)<sup>15</sup>.

Figure 5. Duration of expatriate assignments



Source: [www.gmacglobalrelocation.com](http://www.gmacglobalrelocation.com).

<sup>14</sup> H. Steinmann, G. Schreyogg, *Zarządzanie. Podstawy kierowania przedsiębiorstwem. Koncepcje, funkcje, przykłady*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Wrocławskiej, Wrocław 1998, p. 489.

<sup>15</sup> According G. Wederspahn (G. Wederspahn, *Costing failures in expatriate HRM*, “People and Strategy”, Vol. 15:3, 1992, p. 28), the annual cost of the expat’s contract carried out in London for the manager of the American corporation, earning an average of \$100.000, is about \$ 300.000. Similarly Y. McNulty estimated that the average cost of the relocation of the U.S. manager for a three-year contract (assuming that his basic salary is about \$75.000–100.000) can achieve the sum of one million dollars. For: (R. Krzykała-Schaefer, *Zarządzanie międzykulturowe w jednoczącej się Europie*, Wyd. Wyższej Szkoły Bankowej, Poznań 2010, p. 120).

Within two years, i.e. in 2009 and 2010, the number of short-term assignments obviously increased in Europe (56%) and the US (54%). In the countries of Latin America and Asia, the prevailing form of expatriation are traditional long-term assignments (47% of companies coming from Latin America). The companies of Asian provenance record the highest increase in short-term stays of 'commuter' type whereas 42% of European and American companies plan the increase in the number of those assignments<sup>16</sup>.

Increasingly often, a traditional expatriate sent to foreign assignment lasting from 3 to 5 years is replaced by other forms of expatriations encompassing foreign assignments which are shorter, less costly, and more oriented to completion of a specific project<sup>17</sup>. They are so called *flexpatriate contracts*<sup>18</sup>.

The terms found in the literature on flexpatriates are "international business travelers", "sojourners". Interesting term is common in L. Allard's work – "globtrotters"<sup>19</sup>. According to M. Banai and W. Harry, they are "international itinerants" (professional managers who over their careers are employed for their ability, by at least two business organizations that are not related to each other, in at least two different foreign countries)<sup>20</sup>. As a common part of these terms is work-related travel, frequent job rotation, participation in international teams. H. Scullion<sup>21</sup> points to the positive and negative factors of such travel for business purposes.

**Positive factors**, which determine the job rating include:

- the variety and variability of operating and environmental conditions (this is certainly a factor to eliminate routine and consistency in the work of such a manager. Working with different people, in different countries can be rewarding),
- thrill and satisfaction with the new task becomes a driving force behind and motivation for further work and challenges,
- lifestyle of many people corresponds to a lifestyle based on the continuous change of residence, country, building a circle of new friends. Travelling

<sup>16</sup> *International Assignments Survey, Global Mobility Metrics*, Mercer LLC, 2010, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> J. Beaverstock, *Managing across borders: knowledge management and expatriation in professional service legal firms*, "Journal of Economic Geography" 2004, No. 4(2), p. 157.

<sup>18</sup> Typology of expatriate contracts based on the criterion of their duration was presented in: Przytuła S., *Ekspatriant-elastyczny pracownik międzynarodowy*, in: *Sukces w zarządzaniu kadrą. Elastyczność w zarządzaniu kapitałem ludzkim*, Vol. 1, Ed. T. Listwan, M. Stor, Wydawnictwo UE we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 2012.

<sup>19</sup> L.A. Allard, *Managing globe-trotting expatriates*, "Management Review" 1996, 85(5), p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> M. Banai, W. Harry, *Boundaryless global careers: the international itinerants*, in: *International HRM and international assignments*, Ed. M. Morley, N. Heraty, D. Collings, Palgrave Mc Millan 2006, p. 157.

<sup>21</sup> *Global staffing*, Ed. H. Scullion, D.G. Collins, Routledge, London, NY 2006, p. 164.



for business indicates a trend, style, and even the fashion of international business,

- development and self-improvement through learning about different people, cultural diversity, strengthening the resistance to stressful situations is unpredictable and certainly the value by which enriched their experience and knowledge.

**Negative factors** include:

- separation family. Missed birthdays and events celebrated in the family circle, is exacerbating discomfort and frustration. Even a lot of short-term business trips following with great frequency, cause more family problems than one long trip, which also undoubtedly result in separation and longing for family,
- the stress of traveling (tight timetables, transfers, flights canceled imply business meetings delays and problems with the hotels),
- health problems (exposure to infections and viruses present in the zone, a different bacterial flora in different countries, and lack of exercise, a negative impact on health and fitness and psychological resistance),
- the security (terrorists, kidnappers in many countries with unstable political situation expose foreigners to high risk),
- working in current environment (new technologies, management support systems could cause tension in the work and result in moving the office to the home. Ever-increasing demands and expectations on the part of contractors whose visits sometimes disturb the balance between private and professional life).

The research conducted in the group of flexpatriates reveals that the most important tasks for which they are sent abroad include providing the expert knowledge, supporting the local staff in technical problems, conducting an audit, participating in meetings, congresses and conferences, trainings<sup>22</sup>. All assignments longer than 3 months were coordinated by the HR department whereas the organization and coordination of shorter trips was within the responsibility of flexpatriates' immediate superiors. The time horizon of planning the foreign assignment was very short (usually less than 3 months). The preparation process to the assignment included the information about safety and health regulations in the country of destination, mandatory vaccinations, visa procedures, and air ticket booking. In addition, the English language courses and technical trainings were offered.

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<sup>22</sup> H. Mayrhofer, L. Hartmann, G. Michelitsch-Riedl, I. Kollinger, *Flexpatriate assignments...*, op. cit., p. 1378.

In the case of traditional assignments, the HR department organised the 'look and see trips' in the country of future assignment and intercultural trainings at the expat's request.

Depending on the number of employees assigned to work abroad, the headquarters provided the organisational support and assistance in problem solution in the host country. However, in the case of flexpatriates, such assistance was provided by telephone and in the case of expatriates, it had the form of monitoring visits from the headquarters. The flexpatriate assignments terminated earlier constitute just 1% (flexpatriation failure index).

The Table 1 shows the differences between expatriates and flexpatriates with reference to different aspects of their work abroad.

**Table 1. Difference between expatriates and flexpatriates<sup>23</sup>**

Comparison criterion	Expatriate	Flexpatriate
Assignment duration	from 1 to – 5 years	up to 1 year
Motives for going on foreign assignments	Building corporate culture, strategy implementation and management methods in the case of greenfield investment form	"Firefighting", control, transfer of know-how
The initiative to go abroad	Due in large part to the sending organization (company-backed), because working in foreign subsidiaries requires the knowledge of corporate strategies, procedures that apply in all corporate structures, but also depends on the ability to work and live in a foreign country culturally posting. Push factors of mobility-Expats who are pushed to leave their native country by various pressure are less likely to adopt to local conditions	The initiative to work abroad lies with the candidate and is associated more with the objectives of personal development objectives than company goals (self-initiation) Pull factors of mobility – flexpatriates (free-choice" managers) who are pulled to leave their home country are more eager to assimilate
Assignment administration, organisation and coordination	HR department of the corporation; organizational perspective	The assignments are usually excluded from HR administration; the coordination and organisation is the responsibility of an immediate superior and the person interested in foreign assignment; Employee's perspective

<sup>23</sup> Partly presented in: S. Przytuła, *Ekspatriant-elastyczny pracownik międzynarodowy*, in: *Sukces w zarządzaniu kadrami. Elastyczność w zarządzaniu kapitałem ludzkim*, Vol. 1, Ed. T. Listwan, M. Stor, Wrocław 2012.

Comparison criterion	Expatriate	Flexpatriate
Costs	High – connected with allowances and benefits additional to base pay and the family relocation	Low
Failure index	Very high (about 25–40%), a failure has the form of earlier termination of the contract and therefore the involvement of the HR department and the systemic management of this group of employees are justified	Low – due to short-term trips, a family is not relocated
Assignment attractiveness	An assignment is attractive for employees beginning their professional career or senior employees nearing the end of their careers.	Attractive for the employees of any age; short-term foreign assignments in the form of monitoring visits or audits are part of the contract
Aspects of social life	A family may be relocated to the place of destination where an expatriate works, which is connected with starting life anew, finding schools for children, work for the spouse. The process of social and cultural adaptation may be very difficult and traumatic. The systemic approach to expatriates and support from the corporation create favourable conditions for strengthening the ties between expats and their families staying abroad. The expatriates’ communities support one another, exchange information.	A family does not change the place of residence, the children do not have to change schools, and the spouse does not lose their job. However, frequent trips create a gap in the family life which is sometimes left in the home country for several weeks. Pursuing a hobby, fulfilment of cultural interests, sports, religious and political activities are subordinated to flexpatriate’s timetable, and they are often subject to atrophy. Flexibility in the scope of time and place of work (airports, hotels, frequent changes of time zones, short time of physiological adaptation) disturbs the work-life balance
Problems	The length of assignments in foreign country with culture different from the one in the expat’s country of origin causes problems with adaptation and culture shock. The anxiety connected with career after the termination of assignment and the possibility of work in the headquarters.	The intensity of work in short time causes numerous psychological and physical dysfunctions – getting stale, stress connected with constant travelling, tiredness, reduced resistance to illnesses and suffering from illnesses frequently.

Source: own work on the basis of: H. Mahrhofer, L. Hartmann, A. Herbert, *Career Management Issues for Flexpatriate International Staff*, “Thunderbird International Business Review” 2004, Vol. 46(6); H. Mayrhofer, A. Muller, A. Schmidt, *Implications of flexpatriates’ lifestyles on HRM practices*, “Management Review” 2010, 21(2); N. Doherty, M. Dickmann, T. Mills, *Exploring the motives of company-baked and self-initiated expatriates*, in: “The International Journal of HRM” 2011, Vol. 22, No. 3; K. Inkson, *Expatriate assignment versus overseas experience*, in: *Readings and cases in HRM*, Ed. D. Thomas, Sage Publications, 2003; A. Furnham, *Human mobility in a global era*, in: *The Psychology of Global Mobility*, Ed. S.C. Carr, Springer Science and Business Media, LLC 2010.

J. Selmer<sup>24</sup> also points to the so-called third-culture kids (TCK), which could be described as candidates for flexpatriates. Young people growing up in more than one country, so they are familiar with more than one different culture of the country. These are people, who a large part of their life spent in the culture of national culture other than their parents and developed a sense of connectedness with all cultures, having been in contact with, without showing special attachment to one of them. The research on this group of people point to the following features:

- experience of multiculturalism and openness to other cultures (i.e. not closely identify with one culture),
- respect and tolerance towards others,
- flexibility and territorial mobility,
- interest in learning foreign languages,
- desire to travel and change something in your life-a small tendency to stabilize life. These are people more aware of cultural differences and able to deal with them and their work. Show a greater preference to build an international career and travel with less tendency to stabilize.

## Conclusion

The internationalization of economic activity is associated with higher qualification requirements of the managers-expatriates. Knowledge of foreign languages, experience in international corporations, knowledge of cultural differences are hard skills tested in the process of selection of candidates for foreign contract. However, more often such qualities and skills as openness, mobility, flexibility and ability to adapt to change are required.

The paper presents the differences between the traditional and flexpatriate manager, in relation to various aspects of their work abroad, which was the objective of this conceptual article.

As an advantage, flexpatriate assignments have been regarded as a viable alternative to the challenge of employee unwillingness to relocate abroad due to family or personal issues (more in: Demel, 2010; Feldman, 1992). On the other hand, flexpatriate assignments can potentially bring difficult conditions to employees such as health ailments from constant travel, social isolation, and work and family strain (some of these symptoms were diagnosed in research

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<sup>24</sup> J. Selmer, H. Lam, „*Third-culture kids*”. *Future business expatriates?*, “Personnel Review” 2004, No. 33/4, p. 430.

D. Welch and V. Worm<sup>25</sup>). According to H. Mayrhofer et al<sup>26</sup>, flexpatriate assignments will be more common and will appear to provide greater flexibility for organizations in the short term.

The slowdown in economic activity in recent years and prudential behavior of investors does not mean corporations' resignation of expatriation. Research results of Atlas Corporate Relocation Survey 2009 confirmed the increasing trend of using expats. Answering the question of the expected number of expatriates in the next year compared to the previous year, respondents predicted an increase of foreign contracts, and for more than a half this trend, however, does not change. However, it can be assumed that the form of expatriation will change – from long-term to flexpatriate contracts that in such economic conditions seem to fulfill the principle of economic rationality.

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<sup>25</sup> D. Welch, V. Worm, *International business travelers: a challenge for IHRM*, in: *Handbook of research in IHRM*, Eds. G.Stahl, I. Bjorkman, E.Elgar 2006.

<sup>26</sup> H. Mayrhofer, A. Muller, A. Schmidt, *Implications of flexpatriates' lifestyles on HRM practices*, "Management Review" 2010, 21(2).

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## Резюме

### Гибкость – как черта и способность в профиле квалификационных требований экспатрианта

Повышенная географическая мобильность, культурная гибкость, способность адаптироваться к разным культурным условиям это требования, которые все чаще предъявляются к экспатриантам, т. е. сотрудникам центрального офиса фирмы, отправляемым на работу в зарубежные зависимые компании. Цель настоящей статьи – показать гибкость (понимаемую как умения и личностные качества) как составляющую квалификационного профиля экспата. Представлены здесь также альтернативные традиционной экспатриации формы зарубежных контактов типа *flexpatriate*.

**Ключевые слова:** экспатриант, гибкость, гибкий экспатриант.

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