

## **Expatriates emotional competencies and its impact on job performance: empirical evidence from Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to study the relationship and impact of Emotional Self Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness and Relationship Management on job performance. Extensive review of literature was done to acknowledge the emotional competencies and job performance concept. A quantitative survey was developed and administered to 301 expatriates engaged in the ICT Sector in Malaysia. The findings of this study revealed that all four dimensions of Emotional Intelligence have a relationship with performance of expatriates. Relationship Management dimension has the highest impact. The findings of this study support the results from some earlier studies and also bring out several new ideas such as the importance of Relationship Management. The data for this study was collected via a self-reported questionnaire that could be susceptible to bias. Expatriates who failed in their assignment or expatriates who returned pre-maturely to their home country were not included. For future research, a qualitative research methodology is recommended to provide a deeper understanding. The findings of this study have significantly contributed to the advancement of knowledge in job performance and it is evident that Relationship management has the highest impact on expatriates' job performance. The implications are in the areas of expatriate selection, training and support practices. Although prior research has investigated a number of factors that contribute towards success of expatriates, this paper is one of the early empirical endeavors that examined the impact of the four dimensions of EI on job performance in the ICT sector in Malaysia.*

**Keywords:** *Self Awareness, Self-Management, Social Management and Relationship Management, Expatriates.*

## 1. Introduction

The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has become an important sector in Malaysia's economic development and despite the challenging environment since 2014, the ICT industry in Malaysia showed resilience and continued its growth path. (Steven, 2016) The share of the ICT industry to the economy expanded from 16.5% in 2010 to 17.6% in 2015. In 2015, revenue grew by 9.3% to RM42.1bil driven by higher export sales (MSC Malaysia, 2015). The year 2015 witnessed a 7.4% increase in jobs over 2014 which saw 158,549 jobs with 10,981 new jobs. Foreign workers who are mainly expatriates made up 13.6% of the total workforce in 2015. In 2015, 21,600 expatriates were hired (MSC Malaysia, 2015). The services sector is expected to register a growth rate of 6.9% in the next 5 years (Khuen, 2015). However, in the ICT sector in Malaysia, the availability of innovative local talents for research and innovation activities is a major challenge. This problem is addressed by importing foreign talents (PIKOM, 2012). Therefore, the expatriate population in the ICTs sector in Malaysia is worth studying because this sector is one of the national key economic sectors promoted by the Malaysian government as part of its growth strategy (Immigration in Malaysia, 2013).

To be successful, organizations need to create and sustain competitive advantage and for competitive advantage, organizations depend on the performance of expatriates (Palthe, 2004). Having the right people to manage and operate their businesses is a critical success factor in international operations (Dowling, Festing & Engle, 2008). However, many companies find deploying and developing talent in emerging markets to be a major challenge (Dewhurst, Harris and Heywood, 2012). A research by McKinsey's revealed that most companies have identified rich opportunities created by the globalization but companies also recognize that so long as they do not have enough talent, their reach will continue to exceed their grasp of these opportunities (Hsieh, Lavoie, & Samek, 1999). A survey revealed that one of survey respondents' main concerns was finding suitable expatriates (O'Neill & Rossier-Renaud, 2012). Therefore, in today's global workplace, organizations need to create a talent pool which is a strategic asset to enable them to sustain competitive advantage.

As the competition for international talent picks up, companies are increasingly looking to enhance their mobility policies to attract and retain key global talent (KPMG, 2012). The number of expatriates sent by organizations to foreign countries is ever increasing - 7 out of 10 multinational employers (70%) were expected to send more employees on short-term assignments in the next two years (O'Neill & Rossier-Renaud, 2012). A survey by Tung (1982) found that more than half of the companies in USA had failure rates of 10% -20%. Based on a survey by KPMG (2012), 55% of the respondents stated that up to 5% of assignees were recalled from the host country or dismissed because of inability to perform effectively. Failure in global assignments is not only very risky but also costly (Perkins, 2006). Direct costs of expatriation may be as high as three times the domestic salary (Dowling et al., 2008).

Prior research on job performance has established that several factors such as relational skills, personality and technical skills are important predictors of expatriate success (Templer, 2010; Suutari & Brewster, 1997). However, there is a paucity of research on job performance of expatriates engaged in the ICT sector in Malaysia. Despite the growing interest in expatriates, it is still not certain whether emotional competencies are a determinant of job performance in the ICT sector in Malaysia. This objective of this paper is to examine whether emotional competencies can lead to successful job performance. A survey involving respondents from the ICT sector in Malaysia was undertaken. A clear understanding of the impact of emotional competencies and job performance would aid decision makers and human resource professionals in the design of appropriate expatriates selection mechanism and training programs.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Job Performance**

Job performance is the most important factor that leads organizations to remain competitive (Campbell, 1990). However, despite its importance, relatively little is known about the latent structure of performance (Tubre, Arthur, Bennett, & Paul, 1996). Many authors have defined performance and the related parameters (e.g., Campbell, 1990). Campbell (1990) coming from the psychological perspective described job performance as an individual level variable. Borman and Motowidlo (1997) further classified job performance into task and contextual performance. Borman and Motowidlo (1993) stated that contextual performance is becoming increasingly important but Aguinis (2009), argued that both contextual and task performance are important. Research has also shown that expatriates performance is more complex in a global environment than a domestic one (Black Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Suutari & Tahvanainen, 2002).

Based on past research, there is considerable variation in the types of criteria used in evaluating expatriate performance in global assignments (e.g., Suutari & Tahvanainen, 2002). Past research (e.g., Campbell, 1990; Caligiuri, 1997), revealed that performance dimensions are differentiated between the contextual variables that are prosocial and the contextual variables that are managerial. The first domain proposed by Caligiuri (1997) is technical performance. As stated by Tung (1982), expatriates are sent abroad for high-level managerial jobs and for their technical skills. Expatriates holding technical positions in global assignments must also be able to manage people effectively (Tung, 1994). The second dimension stated by Caligiuri (1997) is the contextual/prosocial dimension. This dimension is important due to significant upheaval in their position where they need to be self-directed and there are more activities that are undertaken to coordinate the activities of peers and teamwork is necessary. The third dimension stated by Caligiuri (1997) is the contextual/managerial dimension.

As cited by Earley and Ang (2003), contextual managerial performance includes managerial responsibilities of maintaining good working relationships among employees and representing the organization to customers and the public. The last dimension stated by Caligiuri (1997) is the expatriate specific performance. In the ICT sector, expatriates play critical roles and their performance should be managed efficiently (Suutari & Tahvanainen, 2002). Managing expatriates' performance across cultural boundaries can present particular challenges and requires important considerations and competencies (Vance & Paik, 2006). There are many factors that influence expatriate job performance such as EI technical skills and relational skills (Templer, 2010; Aykan, 2014). Job performance is a central construct in multinationals and expatriates need to perform many contextual and managerial activities while abroad (Tung, 1994). It is worthwhile to examine the emotional competency dimensions as they relate to expatriates' job performance.

## **2.2 Emotional Competencies**

Emotional competencies include emotional intelligence (EI) which is an increasingly popular competency (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2010). The ability or performance based model by Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined EI as "intelligence" that is, as a set of mental abilities to do with emotions and the processing of emotional information that are a part of, and contribute to, logical thought and intelligence in general. Later, Goleman (1998) set out a framework of emotional intelligence (EI) that reflects how an individual's potential for mastering the skills. According to Goleman (1998), EI competencies are not innate talents, but learned abilities, each of which has a unique contribution to making leaders more resonant, and therefore more effective. Unlike the model by Mayer and Salovey (1997) which proposes that individuals vary in their ability to process information of an emotional nature, Goleman (1998) focuses on EI as a wide array of competencies and skills that drive leadership performance. Goleman (1998) further argued that for leaders, EI is more important than IQ and one of important element of EI is ability to control emotions. Bar-On (2006) further added that emotionally and socially intelligent people including expatriates must effectively understand and express themselves, understand and relate well with others and successfully cope with daily demands, challenges and pressures in the host country. Unlike Salovey and Mayer (1990) who developed more narrow measures that encompass perceiving emotions, understanding emotions, and regulating emotions, the Bar-On measures included social abilities and skills. As stated by Bar-On (2006), "to be emotionally and socially intelligent is to effectively understand and express oneself, to understand and relate well with others, and to successfully cope with daily demands, challenges and pressures".

The model introduced by Goleman (1998) focuses on EI as a wide array of competencies and skills that drive performance. The framework by Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) outlined four main EI constructs instead of five by Goleman (1995). The four constructs are; self-awareness which is the ability to read one's emotions and recognize their impact, self-management that involves controlling one's emotions and impulses and adapting

to changing circumstances, social awareness which is the ability to sense, understand and react to others' emotions and relationship management which is the ability to inspire, influence, and develop others while managing conflict. In this study, emotional competencies cover the four domains of EI as defined by Goleman et al., (2002). The four domains are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. The four domains will increase productivity and performance in an occupational setting (Goleman, 1998). However, there has been a general lack of independent, systematic analysis substantiating this claim (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2010).

### **2.3 Relationship between Emotional Competencies Job Performance**

In a foreign country, psychological stress can have pernicious effects on work performance (Bhaskar et al., 2005). In an unfamiliar environment, expatriates may find themselves in complex relations and experience problems in expressing their feelings and problems (Aykan, 2014). Such stress also affects the emotions of individuals (Aykan, 2014). Expatriates need certain personal characteristics to cope with the rigors of daily life in the foreign environments (Bhaskar et al., 2005). Personal characteristics include EI which is an increasingly popular competency and consulting tool (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2010).

The relationship between EI and performance has received attention by researchers (Gabel, Dolan, & Cerdin, 2005; Mishra & Mohapatra, 2010). Past researchers found a positive relationship between EI and performance (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2010; Araujo & Taylor, 2012). The findings by Gabel et al., (2005) and Aykan (2014) support the propositions made by numerous scholars who emphasized the importance of non-technical factors in explaining the effectiveness of international adjustment. Parke, Seo, and Sherf (2015) found that emotion regulation ability enables employees to maintain higher positive affect. A research by Stein and Book (2011) revealed that the correlation between EI and performance in a variety of careers has ranged up to .45 attributable to EI with an average of .30. Another research by Aykan (2014) found positive relationships between the EI and contextual performance of employees. Gabel et al. (2005) found that although technical competencies are important but EI that covers the capacities of empathy, social responsibility and social relations predict better success. Other researchers have also argued that EI is an important predictor of performance (Aykan, 2014; Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005; Goleman, 1998). A number of different viewpoints and theories have emerged about what EI actually is (Neale, Spencer-Arnell, & Wilson, 2009).

For expatriates, driving emotions in a positive direction is important and studies have shown that emotional competencies play a critical role. O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, and Story (2011) argued that there is good reason to believe that EI predicts job performance because it is likely that the ability to recognize emotions in one's self and in others contributes to effective social interaction, as does the ability to regulate one's own emotions. Emotionally intelligent expatriates are able to regulate their own emotions and the

emotions of others and use emotional information in decision making to achieve positive performance outcomes (Ashkanasky & Daus, 2002). People who are high in EI are also more likely to perceive context-driven emotion patterns and are therefore better able to adapt to these situations than their low EI counterparts and this is very important for expatriates (Lillis & Tian, 2009). Similarly, Cherniss (2000) pointed out a person's ability to perceive, identify, and manage emotions provides the basis for the kinds of emotional competencies that are important for success in any job. However, a study by Cote and Miners (2006) revealed that while EI is a predictor of job performance, it does not have a linear effect. Cote and Miners (2006) found that as cognitive intelligence increases, EI becomes a stronger predictor of task performance. Other researchers have argued that EI provides a foundation for emotional competencies (Goleman, 1998). Goleman (1998) argued that, in addition to intellectual or technical skills, competencies based on EI plays a strong role in performance. Goleman (1998) argued that it would be foolish to assert that good-old-fashioned IQ and technical ability are not important ingredients in strong leadership. But the recipe would not be complete without EI.

The framework of emotional intelligence (EI) can be applied to expatriates because it reflects how an expatriate's potential for mastering the skills of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management translates into leadership and performance during international assignments. Emotional Intelligence competencies are not innate talents, but learned abilities, each of which has a unique contribution to making leaders more resonant, therefore, more effective (Goleman et al., 2002). As explained by Goleman et al. (2002), the competencies are applicable generally. Similarly, these EI competencies that are learned abilities can be applied to expatriates who need to work through their emotions. Self-awareness means having a deep understanding of one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives (Goleman, 1998). This can be applicable to expatriates as they need emotional strength to adjust and perform successfully in a foreign country. Goleman et al. (2002) further added that people with strong self-awareness are realistic and honest. With self-awareness, expatriates must have a deep understanding of their emotions, as well as their strengths and limitations and their values and motives (Goleman et al., 2002). In a foreign country, expatriates who have a high degree of self-awareness can recognize how their feelings affect them, other people, and their job performance (Goleman, 1998). This is applicable to expatriates as people with strong self-awareness can neither be overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful in a foreign country and they are honest with themselves and with others (Goleman, 1998).

### **H1: Emotional Self-Awareness is positively related to performance of expatriates.**

Self-management refers to the understanding of one's emotions and being clear about one's purpose and without knowing what an individual is feeling, the person is at a loss to manage those feelings (Goleman et al., 2002).

Characteristics encompass keeping disruptive behaviors in check, displaying honesty and being flexible in times of change (McShane, & Glinow, 2008). Expatriates who are in control of their feelings and impulses are able to create an environment of trust and fairness. In such an environment, productivity is high and in today's borderless world, self-regulation is important for competitive reasons and people who have mastered their emotions are able to roll with the changes (Goleman, 1998). In a foreign country, the expatriates credibility and trust is particularly important for cultural adjustment and performance (Aycan, 1997). As explained by Goleman, et al. (2002), no leader including expatriates can afford to be controlled by negative emotions, such as frustration and rage or anxiety and panic especially in a foreign country. Leaders including expatriates with such self-mastery embody an upbeat, optimistic enthusiasm that tunes resonance to the positive range (Goleman et al., 2002).

**H2: Emotional Self-Management is positively related to performance of expatriates.**

Social competence encompasses the competency of empathy. As pointed out by Goleman et al. (2002), empathy is crucial for the leader's primal task of driving resonance. In today's environment, empathy is a critical skill for both getting along with diverse workmates and doing business with people from other cultures. As explained by Goleman et al. (2002), empathy is an antidote that attunes people including expatriates to subtleties in body language, or allows them to hear the emotional message beneath the words. Goleman (1998) stated that people including expatriates need a deep understanding of both the existence and the importance of cultural and ethnic differences. As stated by McShane et al. (2008), empathy is the person's ability to understand and be sensitive to the feelings, thoughts and situation of others. Cherniss (2000) pointed out that empathy is a particularly important aspect of EI and researchers have known for years that it contributes to occupational success.

**H3: Emotional Social Awareness is positively related to performance of expatriates.**

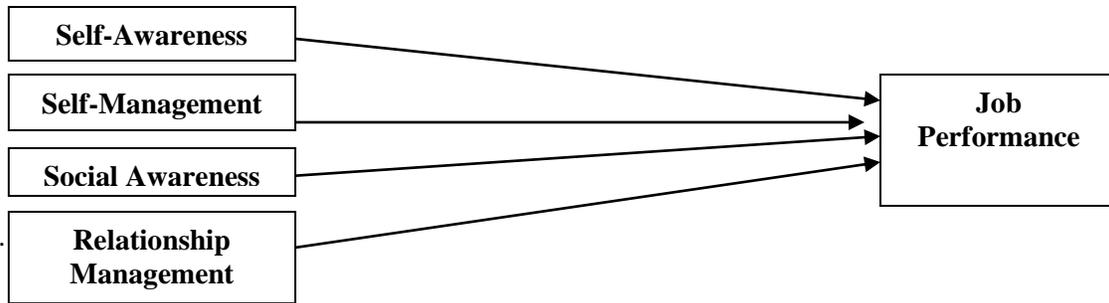
Relationship management or social skill is linked to a variety of practices that require effective emotional expression (McShane et al., 2008). As pointed out by Goleman et al. (2002), managing relationships skillfully boils down to handling other people's emotions and relationship management is friendliness with a purpose of moving people in the right direction. Social skill relates to building and maintaining relationships and as described by Goleman et al. (2002), relationship management is friendliness with a purpose of moving people in the right direction. Relationship competence that includes social networking is one of the factors that contribute to success of expatriates. Liu and Schaffer (2005) found that social capital had the greatest influence on expatriate adjustment and performance. Socially skilled people tend to have a wide circle of acquaintances and they have a knack for finding common ground with people of all kinds and a knack for building rapport (Goleman, 1998).

**H4: Relationship Management is positively related to performance of expatriates.**

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design and Conceptual Framework

This is an explanatory research to establish causal relationships between variables. It is based on positivism philosophy and positivism relates to the philosophical stance of the natural scientist. The emphasis here is on studying to explain the relationships between emotional competencies and job performance of expatriates as shown in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1. Relationship between emotional competencies and job performance**

This was a cross sectional research using survey where the primary purpose was to identify the relationship between the variables. Primary data was collected. This is a quantitative research where the questionnaires were administered electronically using the internet or delivered by hand to respondents and collected later (Saunders et al., 2009).

#### 3.2 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The target population was expatriates working in the ICT sector in Malaysia. Probability sampling method was used where a list of companies' and the population elements was prepared and used as a sampling frame based on list of expatriates provided by ICT companies and various directories of International Business Chambers in Malaysia. Email response rates may only approximate 25% to 30% without follow-up (Sheehan, 2001). With a return rate of 30%, 900 target respondents were randomly selected. The initial response rate was low (12 percent) and friendly reminders were sent. A total of 247 questionnaires were received through mail and 71 through direct distribute and collect method. Only 301 questionnaires were usable.

#### 3.3 Instrumentation

Questionnaire was used to collect virtually all data that was analyzed by computer (Saunders, Lewis, Thornbill, 2009). Four demographic variables (gender, marital status, age

and length of stay) were included. The fixed alternative questions required the respondents to choose the best answer based on a five- point Likert-type scale. The questions for the dependent variable were adapted from the study by Caligiuri (1997). Job performance was divided into four dimensions: Contextual/Managerial Dimension, Contextual/Prosocial Dimension, Expatriate Specific Dimension and Technical Performance Dimension. The questions on emotional competencies were adapted from the study by Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002).

### **3.4 Reliability and Validity**

Reliability is the extent to which a variable is consistent in what it is intended to measure (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson & Tatham, 2006). Validity addresses whether the research measures what is said would be measured (Pallant, 2010). The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the dependent variable was 0.919 and for IVs was 0.880. The Cronbach's alpha value was above 0.7 and this is considered acceptable (Pallant, 2010). Pilot testing of the questionnaire provided with some idea of the questionnaire's face validity (Saunders et al., 2009). Experts were asked to comment on the representativeness of the questions (Saunders et al., 2009). A strong correlation value of .723 indicates that the scale is measuring its intended concept (Hair et al., 2006).

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics was used to acquire a feel for the data by checking the central tendency and the dispersion. The reliability of a measure is established by testing for both consistency and stability and this was based on Cronbach's alpha. A check for violations of linearity and homoscedasticity was done (Pallant, 2010). Pearson Correlation and Multiple regression analysis were used to test the hypothesis as there was a single dependent variable (Hair et al., 2006).

## **4. Findings**

The sample of respondents included 71% (n=214) male 29% (n=87) female. The majority of the respondents, 57% (n=172) were married. The respondents age included 41% (n=123) between the age range of 26 to 30 years, 29% (n=87) between the age range of 31 to 35 years and 3% (n=9) above the age of 45 years. The majority of the respondents, 34% (n=102) stayed for more than 3 years. Majority of participants i.e.59 (19.6%) were from India, 47 (15.6%) from Europe, 51 (16.9%) from ASEAN countries, 29 (9.7%) and the rest from other countries. As shown in Table 1, all the Pearson's correlation was positive and showed that the correlation between the IVs and DV was supported. The correlation coefficient was high ( $r=.723$ ).

A high positive correlation suggests that an increase in emotional competencies will result in an increase in the performance of expatriates. The correlation was also statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 1. Pearson Correlation coefficient**

|             | Performance | Self-Aware | Self-Mgmt | Social Mgmt | Relationship Mgmt |
|-------------|-------------|------------|-----------|-------------|-------------------|
| Performance | 1           | .612**     | .649**    | .603**      | .612**            |
| Self-Aware  | .612**      | 1          | .733**    | .625**      | .552**            |
| Self-Mgmt   | .649**      | .733**     | 1         | .691**      | .623**            |
| Social-Mgmt | .603**      | .625**     | .691**    | 1           | .674**            |
| Rel. Mgmt   | .612**      | .552**     | .623**    | .674**      | 1                 |

In Table 2, an ‘R’ value of .723 indicates that the correlation between the IVs and DV is high. The coefficient of determination (R square = .522) means that 52 percent of the variance in the DV was being explained by the IVs. The Adjusted R Square of .516 means that it accounted for 52% of the variance in the criterion variable even after taking into account the number of predictor variables in the model. The Durbin-Watson result is 1.806 and this indicates no problem of autocorrelation (Chinna, Karunthan & Yuen, 2013).

**Table 2. Overall Model Fit**

|  |        |
|--|--------|
| Multiple R                                       | .723   |
| Coefficient of Determination ( <i>R square</i> ) | .522   |
| Adjusted R square                                | .516   |
| Standard Error of estimate                       | .31429 |
| Durbin Watson                                    | 1.755  |

In Table 3, the standardized Beta coefficient shows the strength of relationship between an IV and DV (Hair et al., 2006). All the emotional competencies had a relationship and gave significant impact to the performance of expatriates. Based on the results shown above, hypothesis H1, H2, H3 and H4 were proven.

**Table 3. Variables entered in the Regression Model**

| Model             | Unstandardized Coefficients |            | Standardized Coeff. | t     | Sig. |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------|-------|------|
|                   | B                           | Std. Error |                     |       |      |
| (Constant)        | 1.466                       | .153       |                     | 9.558 | .000 |
| Self-Aware        | .156                        | .045       | .210                | 3.431 | .001 |
| Self-Mgmt         | .204                        | .056       | .246                | 3.659 | .000 |
| Social-Mgmt       | .099                        | .048       | .129                | 2.062 | .040 |
| Relationship-Mgmt | .206                        | .046       | .256                | 4.485 | .000 |

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of emotional competencies on the performance of expatriates. The results of this study revealed that all the four dimensions of EI have an influence on performance of expatriates in the ICTs sector. The results showed that Relationship Management attribute is of high importance. Support was found for bulk of the conceptual framework and the research questions that were made in this research study. Higher levels of emotional competencies will result in better job performance. The findings emphasize the criticality of expatriate performance and managing emotions by expatriates in the ICTs sector in Malaysia. Organizations can strengthen their expatriates' performance and achieve competitive advantage by developing stronger links between the four dimensions of EI and job performance. In general, the findings of the present study found some consistencies with results of prior studies (e.g., Mishra & Mohapatra, 2010; Gabel, Dolan, & Cerdin, 2005; Aykan, 2014). Similar to the finding by Parke, Seo, and Sherf (2015), the results of this study may be beneficial for organizations to leverage emotional competencies when selecting expatriates.

The findings will also provide theoretical and practical implications for managing expatriates and offer an alternative viewpoint. This research helps to fill the research gaps, hence adds to the literature of expatriates performance and adjustment. This study will be one of the first studies to examine the relationships between emotional competencies and performance of expatriates engaged in the ICTs sector in Malaysia. The evidence from this study contains implications for companies in selecting and training of expatriates. Hence, human resource managers should consider emotional stability before engaging expatriates in the ICTs sector in Malaysia. A successful assignment starts with an appropriate selection and training of expatriates and these attributes highlighted in this study should become the key selection criteria and the content and design of the training plan. Individuals can also adopt strategies to overcome stress and improve performance. The findings are also expected to assist in creating foundational solutions to support successful performance by expatriates engaged in the ICTs sector in Malaysia.

There are a number of limitations and issues discussed in this study. Firstly, there are other competencies such as social competencies that should be examined in future studies. The data for this study was collected via a self-reported questionnaire that could be susceptible to bias. Expatriates who failed in their assignment or expatriates who returned prematurely to their home country were not included. The limitations of this study provide directions for future research. For future studies, a more in-depth research on factors that affect performance and cross cultural adjustment of expatriates can be undertaken using the qualitative approach.

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