Cross Cultural Adaptation of an American Expatriate in Japan

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Profile of the American Expatriate

To accomplish this expat profile, an American national named John Hawk is chosen who currently lives in Japan. As far as the background of Mr. John is concerned, he was born in Texas, USA and completed his MBA from Harvard University. After completing his educational milestone, i.e., an MBA from a prestigious institute of the world, his professional journey progressed with MNCs (multinational corporations) in several positions in his native country. He worked in multiple managerial positions in the country offices of the organization he joined for several years with enthusiasm and high-level professional achievements. His sufficient experience and professional skills urged the company to offer him the country-manager position at the Japan office. It was a surprising challenge for John as he had very little awareness of Japanese culture and language. With the amalgamated emotions of surprise and gladness, he accepted the challenge concerning the said offer by the company and moved to Japan. However, in his personal life, he is a 44-year-old married guy blessed with two children. So in 2015, he arrived with his family in Japan and started his new job in the Tokyo office of the company.

Cultural and Workplace Adjustment

Since his arrival in Japan, John had to confront and adopt a very different lifestyle and work environment in the context of culture. This also posed various challenges to John while performing his duties as country manager. The cultural cleavage between his native and host countries is very wide, with the two cultures even somewhat contrary to each other. In the USA, independence and individual freedom are considered cultural values that urge people to have particular minds and opinions regarding any aspect (Morgan, 2022). Japan, meanwhile, demonstrates a collectivist community culture adorned with harmony, politeness, respect for each other, especially for elders, and unique social order (Coulmas, 2023). In the USA, direct communication in alliance with an individualistic approach is a high social value and cultural boost. However, in Japan, non-verbal communication with specific gestures and actions is considered a cultural priority.

Language and Custom Barriers

Furthermore, with the widened cultural gap, John tried to navigate his job role effectively and efficiently. But as an expatriate in Japan, he faced several severe problems along with cultural issues. The most significant among them was the Japanese language along with Japanese customs. He tried hard to learn the language as it was a dire need to communicate with colleagues and staff along with the resident community. In addition, for introducing new management styles and implementing novel ideas in the organization, the language could become a monstrous barrier. Due to immense struggle, he learned the language but to date could not become fluent in Japanese. Along with him, his family members also suffered from the same panic situation to adapt and survive in a new place. For successful learning, the members of this family had undergone various language courses, tutorial classes and improved their language skills. Other than the verbal language, the Japanese populace also has strong nonverbal communication aspects with deep meanings (Odeh et al., 2021). This nonverbal Japanese language also took time and effort for smooth and successful understanding. Such a language aspect is not part of American culture at all.

Culture Shock and Adaptation

In this context, John faced several cross-cultural issues, among which the most significant was culture shock that posed severe consequences. He faced anxiety and disorientation along with a frightening feeling in this strange world with a new and unexpected culture. He had to align and adjust himself with social values, cultural norms, specific communication gestures, customs and habits of the populace. Instead of direct expressions of opinions and the habit of speaking freely, he had to choose his words carefully and even to communicate without words for the sake of harmony and social order of Japanese people. Similarly, he had to face problematic situations on visits to the USA, especially in gatherings with his family and friends. It looked like his life had hung up in the twilight of two contrasting cultures, and while adjusting in Japan, he unintentionally forgot the cultural freedom of the USA. It provoked a state of mind that required readjustment in his native country whenever he returned. In addition, he missed the slow and evolutionary rise of new cultural impressions in American society, which often posed feelings of being a stranger in his mind and heart.

Japanese Business Etiquette

Moreover, in the context of organizational concerns, he had to navigate special aspects of Japanese business culture. For example, he had to learn Japanese protocols and etiquette for honoring superiors and elders in business meetings, along with specific ways of card exchange. He had to make efforts to learn both the Japanese job and work values to address and lead his staff and colleagues. The huge problem was the non-expression of opinions by colleagues as it was practised in America. Similarly, he learnt how to keep a balance between the unspoken needs of employees and

the goals of the company. It required a deep understanding of the cultural values of Japanese society to deal with the local staff of the company. He had to find the procedures to make his employees motivated and dedicated to the work.

Conclusion

Finally, it can be inferred that John as an expatriate faced numerous issues in Japan. These comprise social, cultural, cross-cultural communication, and Japanese etiquette, etc. He had to struggle to navigate the business culture of the country, which presented very confusing issues. His adjustment along with his family members was time-consuming and effort-based. In addition, the language barrier in alliance with non-verbal communication aspects posed hurdles for adjustments. Overall, his accepted position of country manager in Japan needed much effort on his part to discharge his duties efficiently.

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