

An Assessment of Assessment Instruments for Expatriate Candidate Selection

With attachment: Principles of Expatriate Candidate Assessment

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Introduction

Cornelius Grove & Associates ("GROVEWELL") has begun to hear from clients who say that, even though they are using expatriate candidate assessment instruments, they still suffer costly, embarrassing expatriate failures. GROVEWELL's partners understand why these widely marketed assessment instruments are falling short of the desired results. This short essay states our point of view, and our remedy.

We begin with a caution: In the case of expatriate success, as in the case of many other types of human performance, no instrument and no procedure can achieve, year after year, 100% predictive accuracy. For example, few instruments have received more painstaking development than the SATs that U.S. students take during the college application ritual. Nonetheless, predictive shortcomings of the SAT are well known.

Why Do Expatriate Assessment Instruments Fall Short?

Most commercially available expatriate candidate assessment instruments may be objectively described as (1) research-based, (2) individually completed, (3) self-report, (4) personality assessments.

1. Research-based: We believe that commercially available instruments are research-based, and that the research supporting these instruments was completed according to accepted social scientific standards.

Since personality variables certainly constitute one class of factors contributing to the extent to which an expat is successful abroad, and since many expatriates do enjoy some measure of success abroad, it is not surprising that research is able to discover correlations between personality and expat success. Corporate decision-makers note the large sample sizes and positive correlations; they go on to make the easy assumption that the resulting commercially available instruments have excellent predictive validity.

As in the case of the SATs (which are not personality tests) for future college students, so in the case of assessment instruments for future expats: The ultimate determinants of success or failure do not lie wholly within the individual, whether as knowledge, aptitude, or personality. Those that do lie within the individual are not all assessed with ease. Expatriate success, like college success, is ultimately determined by a multiplicity of factors: some are internal and easy to assess; some are internal and very difficult to assess; some are external, subject to capricious changes, and even more difficult to assess.

The fact that an assessment instrument is research-based does not guarantee that it predicts well.

2. Individually completed: Candidates complete commercially available expat assessment instruments through interaction between themselves and either a computer screen or pieces of paper. Responses are then sent away for computer scoring; results are later returned to the firm and to the candidate.

The interesting fact is that, in the interest of efficiency and economy, the active personal presence and judgement of experienced human beings have been removed from the process. The assumption is that human judgement was applied during the creation of the instrument; after that, "one size fits all." We believe that this elimination of personal, active, experienced human judgement is a major weakness.

How many businesses assess candidates for employment totally by means of an instrument completed in isolation? Few. Decision-makers know that there is too much at stake to rely completely on a one-size-fits-all coldly objective assessment. Instead, all candidates are personally interviewed by one – often by more than one – person who knows the firm extremely well.

Don't expat candidates warrant attention like that given to employment candidates? After you've dealt with a few expatriate failures, you might begin to think that the answer to this question really should be "yes."

If your answer is "yes," then who should do the interviewing? GROVEWELL's answer is that it must be someone who has experienced first-hand the challenges of expatriate life and work. Also very valuable is familiarity with the body of research-generated knowledge about expat success and failure generated over 40 years by the intercultural profession.

Responses to pre-determined questions, provided in isolation, cannot equal the nuanced judgement of a human being who is experienced as an expat, and who interacts face-to-face with candidates and spouses.

3. Self-report: Virtually all expat assessment instruments are completed by the candidate and (if any) spouse on the basis of what he or she is willing to, or wants to, reveal via self-report. This is a problem.

In the case of candidates who consciously want to go abroad, the "correct" answers are often obvious and easily selected. Given that everyone who completes these instruments is smart and well educated, it's nearly impossible to create an instrument on which the correct answers are not obvious. The tendency of candidates to consciously try to select correct answers undermines whatever predictive validity an instrument may have. Also, many expat candidates have never had a significant immersion experience in an unfamiliar culture. (Tourism does not qualify as an immersion experience.) So even if a candidate is trying consciously to select the correct answers, his or her experience base for doing so is woefully incomplete. This further undermines predictive validity.

The fact that most instruments rely on self-report compromises whatever validity they might have.

4. Personality Assessments: While an understanding of a candidate's personality make-up must figure in any expat assessment process, the expectation that an assessment can largely be based on an individual's personality traits ignores the complexly variegated reality of living and working in any unfamiliar culture. Personality assessments look at merely one set of variables among many.

Why have the developers of commercial assessment instruments tended to rely heavily on personality measures? The fundamental reason is that, in a highly individualistic culture such as that of the U.S., there is much fascination with individual psychology. Thus, personality measurement is highly developed in the U.S. and personality assessments are readily accepted by the lay public.

At GROVEWELL, we know that personality is merely one factor among many and that personality traits can have unanticipated outcomes in unfamiliar cultures.

We also know that the most skilled evaluator of anyone's risk of failure abroad is not a psychologist but rather someone who is intimately familiar with the day-to-day realities of life and work in unfamiliar cultures, and who extensively interviews candidates and spouses face-to-face.

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Principles of Expatriate Candidate Assessment

Following are the nine guiding principles of GROVEWELL LLC

1. "Technical competence" and "cross-cultural suitability" are equally critical for expatriate success. GROVEWELL assesses only cross-cultural suitability. The company alone assesses technical competence.
2. "Cross-cultural suitability" is a combination of two factors:
 - a. "Potential for cross-cultural competence" of the candidate and his/her spouse.
 - b. "Situational readiness" of the candidate and his/her spouse and children. Situational readiness asks this question, "Is now a good time in the life of this family for it to relocate abroad?"
3. Expat assessment, properly understood, identifies candidates *at risk of failure abroad*. No assessment procedure can possibly identify candidates who will be exceptionally successful abroad.
4. No *single* instrument, approach, or process can reliably identify candidates who are at risk abroad.
5. An optimal process for a "balanced" expat assessment draws on three information sources:
 - a. Face-to-face behavioral-based interviewing (BBI) of candidate and spouse;
 - b. Results from a paper-and-pencil self-assessment instrument (see principle 7 below); and
 - c. As appropriate, information from others who know the candidate & spouse. An effective 360° instrument for gathering information from others is GROVEWELL's *Survey on Intercultural Relocation Adaptability* [information at Grovwel.com/expatriate-training/].
6. An interviewer must be someone who is intimately familiar with the day-to-day realities of life and work in unfamiliar cultures, and who extensively interviews candidates and spouses face-to-face.
7. The process involves collaboration between candidate/spouse on the one hand, and interviewer on the other. The interviewer presents him/herself not as a judge but as an experienced confidant and mentor.
8. A key objective of the assessment process is for at-risk candidates to voluntarily choose to withdraw.
9. Another key objective is for the candidate and spouse's "potential for cross-cultural competence" to improve as a direct result of participating with the experienced interviewer in the collaborative process.

For more information, visit WillaHallowellConsulting.com/expatriate-coaching/

Note on 360° assessments: To the extent possible, GROVEWELL seeks to obtain information about candidate and spouse from business associates and others who know them well. This commitment always is prefaced by "as appropriate" or "to the extent possible" because 360° assessment procedures, accepted in the U.S., are inappropriate in some cultures. Cultures with constellations of values differing from those of the U.S. may regard such procedures as offensive. Two examples: (1) In some cultures, people don't accept that information they give will truly be confidential. (2) In other cultures, 360° procedures collide with values emphasizing *strong subjective commitment* to friends and colleagues, making it offensive to be asked to say things about them from an "objective" (possibly *uncomplimentary*) point of view. An attempt to use 360° procedures in such cultures is to risk being destructive of relationships and office morale. GROVEWELL's own *Survey on Intercultural Relocation Adaptability* is not appropriate for application with expat candidates from every cultural background.