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A Literature Review on the Implementation of Cultural Adaptation to Improve Expatriate Performance

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Abstract: This study integrates the three main pillars that determine the success of cultural adaptation and expatriate performance in multinational companies: Cultural Intelligence (CQ), Social Support (SS), and Expatriate Performance Management (EPM). Through a literature review of 13 empirical articles from 2018 to 2025 indexed in Q1–Q2 journals on Scopus and Web of Science, this study identifies two pathways to expatriate success: a full mediation pathway in which CQ and social support influence performance via cultural adaptation first (CQ/SS → cross-cultural adaptation → expatriate performance), and a direct effect pathway in which all three factors can directly influence performance without going through cultural adaptation (CQ/SS/CCA → performance). Key findings indicate that motivational CQ has the strongest influence on work adjustment, while family support—particularly from a spouse—has the greatest impact on overall expatriate adaptation. This study also reveals the principle of equifinality, whereby various combinations of factors can lead to optimal performance depending on boundary conditions such as cultural distance, perceived cultural novelty, and characteristics of the host country. Given that the expatriate failure rate is quite high—reaching 40%—investment in comprehensive cultural adaptation programs is a strategic necessity for multinational organizations. Managerial implications emphasize the need for a holistic approach that includes expatriate selection based on cultural intelligence profiles, multi-domain support programs involving the organization, supervisors, coworkers, and family, as well as a culturally relevant performance management system that involves multiple raters and balances global standards with the local context. This study contributes to the development of IHRM theory by integrating previously separate perspectives into a comprehensive framework, shifting the paradigm from simple cause-and-effect thinking to an understanding of complex systems in which cultural adaptation is viewed as the result of dynamic interactions among various interrelated elements.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Cultural Intelligence, Social Support, Expatriate Performance.

Indonesian Abstract: *Penelitian ini mengintegrasikan tiga pilar utama yang menentukan keberhasilan adaptasi budaya dan kinerja ekspatriat di perusahaan multinasional: Kecerdasan Budaya (CQ), Dukungan Sosial (SS), dan Manajemen Kinerja Ekspatriat (EPM). Melalui tinjauan pustaka terhadap 13 artikel empiris dari tahun 2018 hingga 2025 yang*

terindeks dalam jurnal Q1–Q2 di Scopus dan Web of Science, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi dua jalur menuju kesuksesan ekspatriat: jalur mediasi penuh di mana CQ dan dukungan sosial memengaruhi kinerja melalui adaptasi budaya terlebih dahulu (CQ/SS → adaptasi lintas budaya → kinerja ekspatriat), dan jalur efek langsung di mana ketiga faktor tersebut dapat secara langsung memengaruhi kinerja tanpa melalui adaptasi budaya (CQ/SS/CCA → kinerja). Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa CQ motivasional memiliki pengaruh terkuat terhadap penyesuaian kerja, sementara dukungan keluarga terutama dari pasangan memiliki dampak terbesar terhadap adaptasi ekspatriat secara keseluruhan. Penelitian ini juga mengungkap prinsip equifinalitas, di mana berbagai kombinasi faktor dapat menghasilkan kinerja optimal tergantung pada kondisi batas seperti jarak budaya, persepsi terhadap kebaruan budaya, dan karakteristik negara tuan rumah. Mengingat tingkat kegagalan ekspatriat cukup tinggi mencapai 40% investasi dalam program adaptasi budaya yang komprehensif merupakan kebutuhan strategis bagi organisasi multinasional. Implikasi manajerial menekankan perlunya pendekatan holistik yang mencakup seleksi ekspatriat berdasarkan profil kecerdasan budaya, program dukungan multi-domain yang melibatkan organisasi, atasan, rekan kerja, dan keluarga, serta sistem manajemen kinerja yang relevan secara budaya yang melibatkan beberapa penilai dan menyeimbangkan standar global dengan konteks lokal. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan teori IHRM dengan mengintegrasikan perspektif-perspektif yang sebelumnya terpisah ke dalam kerangka kerja yang komprehensif, menggeser paradigma dari pemikiran sebab-akibat yang sederhana menuju pemahaman tentang sistem kompleks di mana adaptasi budaya dipandang sebagai hasil dari interaksi dinamis di antara berbagai elemen yang saling terkait.

Keywords: Adaptasi Lintas Budaya, Kecerdasan Budaya, Dukungan Sosial, Kinerja Ekspatriat.

INTRODUCTION

Multinational companies face the challenge of effectively managing human resources across diverse cultural contexts in an era of economic globalization and increased cross-border labor mobility. In light of this phenomenon, the International Human Resource Management (IHRM) approach has evolved with a focus on organizational efficiency worldwide and the ability to adapt to different cultural norms, values, and behaviors across various operational locations (Wood et al., 2018) . Over the past decade, international labor mobility has continued to increase. Multinational organizations send more than 3 million expatriates to various countries to manage global operations (Han et al., 2022) (Bader et al., 2021) . Expatriates play a critical role in knowledge transfer, strategic coordination, and cross-border organizational control (Bader et al., 2021) . However, the assignment failure rate ranges from 16–40%, with the cost per failure between USD 250,000 and 1,250,000 (Chanveasna et al., 2024) . To anticipate these issues, a comprehensive analysis is required to mitigate losses resulting from *these* failure costs.

IHRM plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between global strategy and local realities, where the success of cross-cultural management is heavily influenced by sensitivity to the local organizational culture. Effective global HR integration can be achieved if an organization is able to strike an optimal balance between the standardization of global HR practices and localization that is responsive to the local context, supported by integrated HRIS technology, the global competencies of HR professionals, a strong commitment from top management, a coordinated cross-country talent management system, an inclusive organizational culture that values diversity, effective cross-border communication and collaboration, systematic change management, and the use of HR analytics for data-driven decision-making (Bae, J., Chen, S., & Lawler, 2016) . However, in practice, many companies still struggle to align global HR

policies with the social and cultural values of local employees, leading to value conflicts, decreased performance, and resistance to change (Kwong et al., 2021) .

Organizational cultural adaptation is defined as the level of psychological comfort expatriates feel with various aspects of the host culture and encompasses three dimensions: (1) general adjustment (comfort in daily life), (2) work adjustment (adaptation to the work environment), and (3) interactional adjustment (interaction with local residents (Kadam et al., 2021) . Failure to adapt culturally not only results in the expatriate's premature return and underperformance but also has the potential to disrupt operational continuity, knowledge transfer, and the overall effectiveness of the subsidiary.

Research on expatriate cultural adaptation is explained by identifying three categories of antecedents: (1) individual factors (personality, international experience, adaptability), (2) organizational factors (organizational support, pre-departure training), and (3) job factors (role clarity, similarity of the job to previous assignments (Kadam et al., 2021) . Since then, research in this area has continued to evolve. Research on Cultural Intelligence (CQ) introduced the concept of cultural intelligence as an individual's ability to adapt effectively to new cultural environments. CQ consists of four dimensions: (1) metacognitive—cultural awareness and reflection, (2) cognitive—cultural knowledge, (3) motivational—cross-cultural energy and motivation, and (4) behavioral—behavioral flexibility (Lei et al., 2025) ; (Setti et al., 2022) . A recent meta-analysis found that CQ consistently contributes positively to expatriate adjustment (Han et al., 2022)

A study conducted by Van der Laken et al. (2019) involved a meta-analysis of 84 studies on the role of social support in expatriate success. This study identified three critical domains: work domain support (support from supervisors and the organization), family domain support, and community domain support (support from local residents). Interestingly, family support—particularly spousal support—exhibited the strongest influence (van der Laken et al., 2019) . The study by Bader et al. (2021) of 132 multinational companies from the U.S./U.K., Germany/Austria, and Japan found that approaches to managing expatriate performance differed at the strategic level but were similar at the operational level. Japanese companies rely heavily on expatriates from their home countries, while Western companies prefer local employees. However, all companies agree that setting clear work objectives is key to the success of expatriate assignments, indicating the existence of "universal best practices" amid cultural differences (Bader et al., 2021) . Recent Research on CQ Configurations: Lei et al. (2025) used Fuzzy Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) to demonstrate that expatriates' cultural adaptation results from a complex configuration of CQ dimensions in interaction with boundary conditions such as cultural distance and perceived cultural novelty. A key finding is that not all combinations of CQ dimensions are equally important, and under certain conditions, expatriates without high CQ can achieve work adjustment through compensation from organizational support (Lei et al., 2025)

Although there has been extensive research on expatriate success, there are still three significant research gaps that remain unaddressed: (1) the research is too fragmented. Previous studies have tended to focus on only one aspect—whether it be Cultural Intelligence (CQ), social support (SS), or the expatriate performance management system (EPM). Rarely does research comprehensively combine these three elements to examine how they work together. In reality, an expatriate's success in the field never depends on a single factor; (2) contextual conditions receive insufficient attention. Most studies measure cultural distance objectively—for example, using Hofstede's scores. However, what is often more important is the extent to which the expatriate themselves perceives cultural differences (perceived cultural novelty). Two people assigned to the same country may experience vastly different levels of difficulty adapting, depending on their personal perceptions and experiences. Unfortunately, this subjective aspect is still rarely studied in depth, (3) research approaches are too simplistic. Traditional regression methods commonly used assume that there is only one path to success.

In fact, recent research using a configurational approach (such as fsQCA) shows that there are various combinations of factors that can lead to an expatriate's success—there is no single recipe that fits all situations. This is a crucial insight that conventional methods overlook.

Therefore, this study aims to address these three gaps by: (1) integrating the three main pillars (CQ, social support, and EPM) into a single, comprehensive framework, enabling us to understand how they reinforce one another. Second, it explains limiting conditions such as objective cultural distance, perceived cultural differences, and assignment duration to understand when and under what circumstances these three pillars are most effective. Using a combined literature review of studies from 2018 to 2025, this research provides practical recommendations that multinational companies can immediately apply in managing their global workforce.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the era of globalization, multinational companies are increasingly relying on cross-border workforce mobility to achieve their strategic goals. Assigning employees abroad (expatriates) has become a key strategy for knowledge transfer, developing new markets, and strengthening a company's global network. However, the success of international assignments depends not only on individuals' technical competencies but also on their ability to adapt to different cultural environments, build supportive social networks, and demonstrate optimal performance in the host country. In this context, four key concepts are essential: Cultural Intelligence (CQ) as an individual's ability to understand and function effectively in cross-cultural contexts; Cross-Cultural Adaptation (CCA) as the process of psychological adjustment to a new environment; Social Support as a support network drawn from various sources; and Expatriate Performance Management (EPM) as a formal system for managing the performance of employees abroad (Bader et al., 2021) ; (Presbitero et al., 2023) (Kwong et al., 2021) . These four concepts are interrelated and form the ecosystem for expatriate success in international assignments.

Cross- : Cross-Cultural Adaptation (CCA)

Cross-Cultural Adaptation (CCA) is a dynamic and multifaceted process in which individuals, particularly expatriates, psychologically, socially, and professionally adjust to a new cultural environment with the goal of achieving a balanced level of comfort, effectiveness, and well-being in both daily life and the workplace (Kokubun & Nemoto, 2025) . This adaptation process is not a singular phenomenon but encompasses three main dimensions that are interrelated and influence the success of an international assignment. First, general adjustment refers to adapting to the conditions of daily life in the host country, including adjusting to local food, housing systems, modes of transportation, climatic conditions, and public facilities that may differ significantly from those in the home country. Second, interaction adjustment reflects an individual's ability to interact effectively and build meaningful relationships with host-country nationals, which involves understanding communication norms, social etiquette, and local values. Third, work adjustment indicates the level of comfort and effectiveness expatriates have in carrying out their job responsibilities within the host culture's context, including adaptation to performance standards, management styles, business practices, and role expectations that may differ significantly. Success in these three dimensions of adaptation is crucial for expatriates to function optimally and achieve the goals of their international assignments. Recent studies indicate that CCA is not merely a passive response to a new environment, but rather a proactive process in which expatriates actively shape (craft) and adapt their environment to achieve psychological comfort and work effectiveness. Cultural distance has a paradoxical effect: while motivational CQ is more effective in low-cultural-distance contexts, high-cultural-distance contexts also require cognitive and behavioral CQ to navigate complexity (Setti et al., 2022) ; (.

Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is an individual's ability to understand, adapt to, and function effectively in situations involving cultural diversity, conceptualized as a multidimensional construct consisting of four components: (1) metacognitive CQ (cognitive awareness and control in cross-cultural interactions), (2) cognitive CQ (knowledge of other cultures' value systems and norms), (3) motivational CQ (energy and willingness to engage in multicultural situations), and (4) behavioral CQ (the ability to display culturally appropriate verbal and nonverbal behavior) (Bader et al., 2021) . A recent study using fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) by Lei et al. (2025) identified that work adjustment results from a complex configuration of CQ dimensions in interaction with boundary conditions such as cultural distance and perceived cultural novelty, indicating that there is no "one best way" to apply CQ—multiple pathways can lead to successful adaptation (equifinality), and that CQ is a malleable capability that can be developed through cross-cultural training, repeated multicultural exposure, and structured self-reflection (Setti et al., 2022)

Social Support (SS)

Social Support in the context of expatriation refers to an individual's perception that they are valued and part of a mutually supportive network, encompassing organizational support (company policies and resources), supervisor support (guidance from superiors), coworker support (assistance from coworkers), and family support (emotional support from family) (van der Laken et al . A meta-analysis by Van der Laken et al. (2019) of thousands of expatriates revealed that family support has the greatest impact on expatriate adaptation, followed by organizational support and supervisor support, with social support showing varying effects depending on the domain and source of support. Recent research indicates that social support not only reduces stress but also facilitates knowledge transfer, cultural learning, and organizational commitment, with Chanveasna et al. (2024) finding that organizational support has a strong direct influence on expatriate performance, indicating the importance of a comprehensive support system for the success of international assignments (Stoermer et al., 2021) ; (Kwong et al., 2021) ; (Chanveasna et al., 2024) .

Expatriate Performance (EPM)

Expatriate Performance Management (EPM) is a formal system used by multinational organizations to set goals, evaluate performance, provide feedback, and reward expatriates, encompassing performance planning, performance appraisal, feedback mechanisms, and reward systems (Bader et al., 2021) . A comparative study by Bader et al. (2021) of multinational companies from various countries identified a pattern of convergence and divergence: at the strategic level, there were significant differences in cross-cultural staffing approaches, but at the practical level, similarities were found, with goal setting emerging as a universal best practice across cultures. Key challenges in EPM include geographical distance that hinders direct observation, cross-cultural differences in the interpretation of performance standards, conflicting demands between headquarters and local subsidiaries, and a lack of contextual understanding among evaluators in the home country. Recent research indicates that effective EPM must take cultural context into account, involve multiple raters—including local managers—and integrate task performance and contextual performance into evaluations, with an emphasis on developing psychological capital and organizational resilience to enhance expatriate effectiveness in situations of uncertainty (Bader et al., 2021) ; (Kwong et al., 2021).

METHODS

This study employs a literature review using a narrative synthesis and thematic analysis approach. A literature review was chosen because: (1) it can integrate findings from various types of research (meta-analyses, quantitative studies, qualitative studies); (2) it provides a holistic understanding of the multidimensional phenomenon of expatriate cultural adaptation; (3) it identifies research gaps and maps the knowledge landscape systematically and transparently; (4) it generates evidence-based recommendations for IHRM practice.

Table 1: Criteria Used to Select Journals

Dimension	Criteria
Topic	Literature Review on the Implementation of Cultural Adaptation to Improve Expatriate Performance
Context	Expatriates working in multinational companies
Methodology	Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods empirical studies; meta-analysis
Publication Period	2018–2025
Quality	Reputable peer-reviewed journals, indexed in Q1–Q2 (Scopus, Web of Science)
Language	Publications in English

This study focuses on a literature review regarding the implementation of cultural adaptation to improve expatriate performance. The research context focuses on expatriates working in multinational companies. The methodology used includes quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, and meta-analysis studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of expatriate cultural adaptation. The publication period under review is 2018–2025, with strict journal quality criteria: reputable peer-reviewed journals indexed in the Q1–Q2 categories of the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases. The selection of these high-quality journals aims to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings. All publications reviewed are in English to capture international literature relevant to the research topic.

The selection process consists of three main stages:

Identification

Collecting all relevant articles from various databases using predetermined keywords.

Screening (Initial Screening)

Removing duplicates and evaluating relevance based on titles and abstracts.

Eligibility (Content Eligibility)

Reading the full text of the articles to ensure alignment with the research focus, namely IHRM strategies and organizational cultural adaptation.

The final selection yielded approximately 13 key articles most relevant to the research topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The theoretical framework was developed in this study by reviewing various literature. Based on the results of the literature review above, there are two theoretical frameworks to be developed in this study, as shown in the following figure:

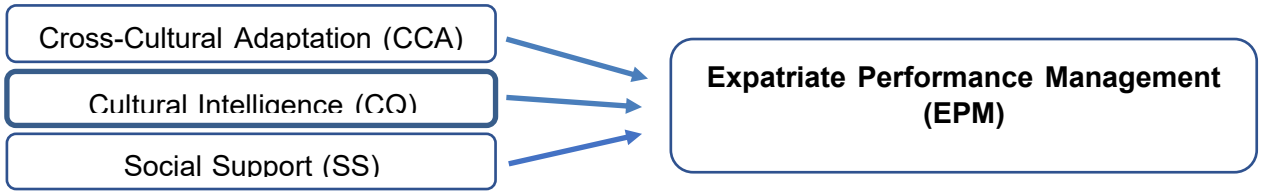

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

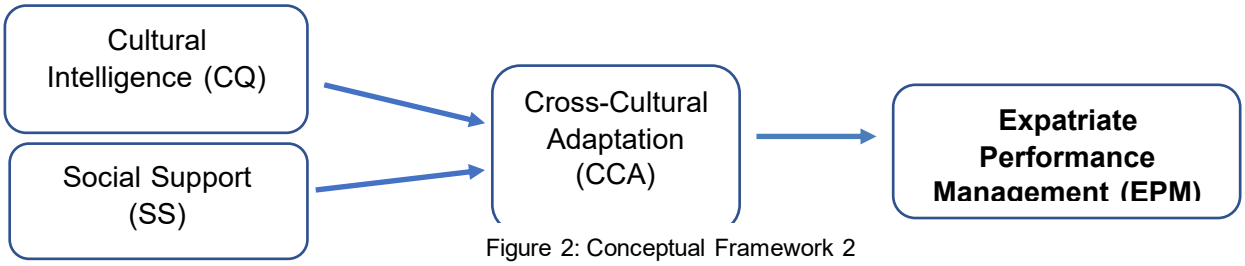

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework 2

Based on the conceptual framework above and the various theories studied, it can be explained that there are two pathways that can be used to improve expatriate performance (EPM)

First Pillar: Cultural Intelligence as the Foundation for Adaptation

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) has proven to be the most consistent predictor of successful cultural adaptation among expatriates. A key finding from the study by Lei et al. (2025), which employed Fuzzy Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), indicates that CQ is not a static trait but rather a dynamic system that operates through complex configurations among its dimensions. This study identified that not all combinations of CQ dimensions produce the same effects, and under certain conditions, there are multiple pathways leading to successful adaptation (equifinality).

The motivational dimension of CQ consistently showed the strongest influence on work adjustment with a standardized coefficient, followed by metacognitive CQ and behavioral CQ. A meta-analysis by Han et al. (2022) of 65 research samples found that motivational CQ had the highest correlation with expatriates' general adjustment, surpassing the influence of the Big Five personality traits and prior international experience. These findings indicate that the willingness and intrinsic motivation to engage with a new culture are more decisive for successful adaptation than cultural knowledge alone.

However, recent research shows that the effectiveness of CQ is highly dependent on boundary conditions such as objective cultural distance and perceived cultural novelty. Setti et al. (2022) found that motivational CQ is more effective under conditions of low cultural distance, whereas in high cultural distance contexts, a combination of CQ dimensions involving cognitive and metacognitive CQ becomes more critical. Furthermore, research by Stoermer et al. (2021) identified a moderation pattern based on the host country context: behavioral CQ is more important in developed economies that emphasize behavioral flexibility, whereas cognitive CQ is more crucial in emerging economies that require a deep understanding of local norms. Another significant finding is that, under certain conditions, expatriates with low CQ can still achieve work adjustment through compensation provided by strong organizational support. This suggests that IHRM strategies need not focus solely on selecting expatriates with high CQ but can also develop robust organizational support systems to compensate for limitations in individual competencies.

Pillar Two: Social Support as a Multi-Domain Support System

Social support has been shown to play a role just as important as CQ, with a more complex pattern of influence because it involves multiple domains and multiple agents. A meta-analysis by Van der Laken et al. (2019) of 84 studies identified three critical domains of social support: work domain support (support from supervisors and the organization), family domain support (support from spouses and family), and community domain support (support from local residents). Interestingly, family support—particularly support from a spouse—showed the highest effect size, indicating that family adaptation is a critical factor that is often overlooked in traditional IHRM strategies.

Research by Chanveasna et al. (2024) found that the combination of social support and CQ together can explain variance in expatriate performance, demonstrating a strong joint predictive effect. These findings confirm that social support does not merely function as a moderator or mediator but has a direct effect on critical outcomes such as adjustment and performance. Further analysis reveals that different types of social support have differential effects: organizational support has a greater influence on work adjustment, family support is more critical for general adjustment, while host national support is more decisive for interactional adjustment.

Another key finding is that social support from various sources (home country vs. host country) contributes differently at various stages of the assignment cycle. In the early stages of an assignment, support from the parent company and family in the home country is more crucial, while in later stages, support from local supervisors and the host-country community becomes more significant. This indicates the need for dynamic social support strategies tailored to the different phases of the expatriate lifecycle.

Research by Wood et al. (2018) and Kwong et al. (2021) adds an important perspective on resilience development through social support, particularly in contexts of high uncertainty such as crises, conflicts, or disasters. In these situations, organizational support serves not only as a buffer against stress but also as a mechanism for developing psychological capital (self-efficacy and learned optimism), which enables expatriates not only to survive but also to thrive in the face of adversity.

Third Pillar: Expatriate Performance Management as a Structural Framework

The expatriate performance management (EPM) system is the third pillar that provides a structural framework for guiding, evaluating, and developing expatriate performance. A comparative study by Bader et al. (2021) of 132 MNEs across three country clusters (Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Japanese) identified interesting patterns of convergence and divergence in EPM practices. At the strategic level, there is significant divergence in staffing strategies: Japanese companies adopt an ethnocentric approach in 67.5% of cases, compared to only 5% among Anglo-Saxon companies. However, at the practice level, cross-convergence was found, with goal setting emerging as a universal best practice applied across cultural contexts.

These findings indicate that while the philosophy and strategic orientation of EPM may differ across national cultures, certain practices—such as clear goal setting, regular feedback, and transparent, criteria-based evaluations—possess universal validity. The practical implication is that MNCs need to balance global consistency in core practices with local adaptation in strategic orientation and implementation approaches. Another critical aspect is cultural relevance within EPM systems. Research shows that performance evaluation criteria that do not take local cultural contexts into account can be counterproductive and lead to perceptions of unfairness. For example, in collectivist cultures, performance evaluations that place too much emphasis on individual achievement without considering team contributions can lead to value conflicts and demotivation. Conversely, in individualist " " cultures, reward systems that place too much emphasis on group performance can reduce the motivation of high-performing individuals.

An integrative analysis of these three pillars revealed that they do not operate independently but rather through two distinct yet complementary pathways. The first pathway is the full mediation pathway:

CQ / SS → Cross-Cultural Adjustment → Performance

In this pathway, CQ or SS influences performance by first enhancing cultural adaptation. Research by Setti et al. (2022) found that work adjustment mediates the relationship between

CQ and performance, confirming that cultural adaptation is a key mechanism through which CQ translates into performance outcomes.

The second pathway is the direct effect pathway:

CQ/Social Support/Cross-Cultural Adaptation → Performance.

In this pathway, CQ and social support can directly influence performance without first having to go through cultural adaptation. Schlaegel et al. (2021), through commonality analysis, found that the joint effects of 2–3 dimensions of CQ can directly explain 36–46% of the variance in work-related outcomes. This suggests that under certain conditions, individuals with high CQ can perform well even if they have not yet fully adapted psychologically to a new cultural environment.

The existence of these two pathways confirms the principle of equifinality: there is no single path to expatriate success. Some expatriates achieve high performance through deep cultural adaptation, while others can perform well by leveraging CQ and organizational support even if their personal adaptation remains limited. Understanding these multiple pathways is crucial for designing more flexible and personalized IHRM interventions.

The effectiveness of IHRM strategies depends heavily on boundary conditions that encompass individual, organizational, and environmental characteristics. Cultural distance and perceived cultural novelty are critical moderators that determine the optimal configuration of the three pillars. In a high-cultural-distance context, the combination of high motivational CQ with strong organizational support is the most effective configuration. Conversely, in a context of low cultural distance, behavioral CQ and community support become more dominant. Length of stay and previous international experience also serve as important moderators. Expatriates with extensive international experience demonstrate lower dependence on organizational support but still require high CQ to achieve deep-level adjustment. In contrast, first-time expatriates are highly dependent on structured support programs and intensive pre-departure training.

The host country determines which cultural competencies are most needed. When expatriates are assigned to developed countries with clear rules and norms, they require more skills to adapt their behavior in daily interactions. However, when assigned to developing countries where situations are more uncertain and rules are not always clear, the ability to understand and interpret the local context becomes far more important. Findings on the impact of these factors offer an important lesson: IHRM strategies must be tailored to specific situations. A "one-size-fits-all" approach is no longer effective; organizations need to design strategies customized based on various contextual factors. To this end, companies require careful data analysis and continuous monitoring to identify the most appropriate combination of strategies for each situation. An Overlooked Dimension: The Role of Language in Cultural Adaptation

Although not a primary focus in most research, language proficiency turns out to be a crucial yet often overlooked factor in international human resource management strategies. A comprehensive study by Presbitero et al. (2023) found that language barriers not only disrupt day-to-day workplace communication but also affect expatriates' ability to socialize, share knowledge, and even influence their career opportunities. In multinational organizations, language proficiency creates power dynamics—expatriates with limited proficiency in the local language may be marginalized in informal decision-making processes. Interestingly, language proficiency offers distinct added value in predicting the success of social interactions, separate from cultural intelligence. This means that the ability to communicate in the local language cannot be fully replaced by cultural intelligence alone. Organizations need to incorporate language training as a mandatory component of expatriate preparation programs. Further

research is needed to understand how language proficiency interacts with the three main pillars (CQ, social support, and performance management) in supporting cultural adaptation.

Contributions to the Development of IHRM Theory

This literature review offers several important contributions to the theoretical understanding of international human resource management strategies:

First, this study brings together previously separate perspectives—individual factors, the social environment, and the organizational system—into a single, comprehensive framework. This approach shifts the perspective from simple cause-and-effect thinking to an understanding of complex systems, in which outcomes such as cultural adaptation are viewed as the result of dynamic interactions among various interrelated elements.

Second, the discovery of two paths to success (through adaptation and directly) and the principle that there are many paths to the same goal enrich our understanding of how expatriates can succeed. These findings challenge the long-held assumption that perfect cultural adaptation is an absolute prerequisite for high performance, and open up the possibility of alternative strategies that enable high performance even when cultural adaptation has not yet been fully achieved.

Third, the emphasis on a configuration approach and limiting conditions provides a deeper understanding of the importance of context in international human resource management. This approach aligns with current trends in strategic HR management that emphasize the importance of contextual fit over the universal application of best practices. In other words, the effectiveness of HR practices depends heavily on how well those practices align with the specific organizational situation and environment at hand.

Managerial Implications

An effective international HR management strategy requires an integrated approach encompassing three main pillars: (1) Expatriate selection based on Cultural Intelligence (CQ) profiles, with an emphasis on motivational CQ and metacognitive CQ, rather than technical competencies alone; (2) Comprehensive, multi-domain support programs that include support from the organization, supervisors, coworkers, and—in particular—family support (spouse and children), which has the greatest impact on expatriate adaptation; and (3) A culturally relevant performance management system that balances global standard metrics with locally adapted criteria, involves multiple raters (headquarters and local supervisors), and integrates task performance with contextual performance (cultural adaptation, knowledge transfer). The combination of these three pillars results in two pathways to success: the mediated pathway (CQ/SS → adaptation → performance) and the direct pathway (CQ/social support/CCA → performance), confirming that there is no single “ ” recipe for success; organizational success requires flexibility and a personalized approach tailored to the specific context of each assignment.

Practical investments that need to be made include: (a) Intensive pre-departure training tailored to the destination country, with a focus on developing CQ, family orientation, and local language training; (b) Dynamic, ongoing support programs aligned with the phases of the assignment (intensive organizational support in the early stages, transitioning to local community support in later stages); (c) An HR analytics-based monitoring and adjustment system to identify adaptation barriers early and implement corrective interventions; and (d) A commitment from top management to allocate adequate resources, given that the cost of an expatriate assignment failure ranges from USD 250,000 to 1,250,000 per individual. Consistent implementation of this strategy will reduce expatriate failure rates, minimize assignment costs, and maximize the ROI of investments in global workforce mobility to support the expansion and strategic knowledge transfer of multinational organizations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study successfully integrated the three main pillars that determine the success of cultural adaptation and expatriate performance in multinational companies, namely Cultural Intelligence (CQ), Social Support (SS), and Expatriate Performance Management (EPM). Through a literature review of 13 empirical studies from 2018 to 2025, it was found that these three pillars do not operate independently but rather form two pathways to success: a full mediation pathway (CQ/SS → cultural adaptation → performance) and a direct effect pathway (CQ/SS/cultural adaptation → performance). Key findings indicate that motivational CQ has the strongest influence on work adjustment, family support—particularly from a spouse—has the greatest impact on expatriate adaptation, and goal setting is a universal best practice in cross-cultural performance management. This study also reveals the principle of equifinality, whereby there is no single recipe for success—various combinations of factors can yield optimal performance depending on boundary conditions such as cultural distance, perceived cultural novelty, and characteristics of the host country.

The model developed in this study has significant practical applications for business organizations in managing expatriate assignments. Multinational corporations (MNCs) must prioritize cultural adaptation as a strategic priority before implementing expatriate assignments, as culture has been proven to be a critical factor determining the success or failure of international assignments. Given that the expatriate failure rate ranges from 16–40 percent, with costs per failure between USD 250,000 and 1,250,000, investing in comprehensive cultural adaptation programs is no longer an option but a strategic necessity. PT MNC needs to implement an integrated strategy that includes: (1) expatriate selection based on a CQ profile with an emphasis on motivational and metacognitive CQ; (2) a multi-domain support program involving the organization, supervisors, coworkers, and, in particular, the expatriate's family; and (3) a culturally relevant performance management system that involves multiple raters and balances global standards with the local context.

The managerial implications of this study emphasize the need for a holistic and personalized approach to expatriate management. Organizations must allocate adequate resources for intensive pre-departure training tailored to the host country, dynamic ongoing support programs aligned with the assignment phase, local language training, and comprehensive family orientation. An HR analytics-based monitoring system needs to be implemented to detect adaptation barriers early on and carry out corrective interventions. Top management's commitment to ensuring cultural adaptation as a strategic foundation for international assignments will maximize return on investment, reduce failure rates, and support effective strategic knowledge transfer. By recognizing that culture is a key determinant of expatriate performance, PT MNC can optimize the success of its global expansion and achieve sustainable competitive advantage through effective international talent management.

Author Contributions

All authors made significant contributions to this study. These contributions included research conceptualization, development of the theoretical framework, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, manuscript preparation, scholarly revision, and final approval of the manuscript for publication. All authors confirm that they have read and approved the final version of the article.

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