

Sylvia Przytuła

## Perception of Expatriates by Local Managers: Benefits and Problems in Mutual Cooperation

The objective of this article is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of expats in Polish subsidiaries as conducted by local managers and a diagnosis of benefits and problems arising from cooperation between Polish and foreign managers in the subsidiaries of international corporations operating in Poland. The subject of the descriptive research includes such issues as expatriate strengths and weaknesses in the areas of competencies, organizational culture, non-professional interpersonal relations among expats and local employees, communication, preparation of Polish successors, and problems involving mutual cooperation.

A project entitled “Perception of Managers–Expatriates by Polish Managerial Staff” was undertaken at the beginning of 2013. The survey covered a group of thirty-one Polish managers who had direct contact with expatriates in foreign subsidiaries of corporations in Poland. The research technique took on the form of a structured interview questionnaire.

According to the majority of Polish managers, expats are needed in subsidiaries in Poland. Thus, the summary of pros and cons of their presence in Polish subsidiaries gives a positive result. Expat knowledge and significant experience are their strengths, where Polish managers undeniably benefit during their everyday work with such expats in workgroups. In spite of emphasized weaknesses, which are mainly related to personality, expats are a valuable find for Polish subsidiaries.

**Keywords:** expatriates, local managers, SWOT, Poland.

### Introduction

For a dozen years or so, the destination country for many managers–expatriates has been Poland. This is because of its political, economic, cultural, social, legal, and geographical conditions that define the Polish market as being attractive for the development of foreign investments when compared to other countries in the

region.<sup>1</sup> The presence of expats in the subsidiaries of host countries is very important in terms of managing those units. Attitudes, behavior, working style, and many other personality traits of employees of different nationalities and cultures undoubtedly influence the efficient pursuit of business objectives. Therefore, examining this group of international employees who often hold the highest positions in Polish subsidiaries and branches of their parent organizations is worthwhile.

The objective of this article is the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of expats in Polish subsidiaries as conducted by local managers and a diagnosis of benefits and problems arising from the cooperation between Polish and foreign managers in subsidiaries of international corporations operating in Poland. The subject of the descriptive research encompasses such issues as expatriate strengths and weaknesses in the areas of competencies, organizational culture, non-professional interpersonal relations among expats and local employees, communication, preparation of Polish successors, and problems involving mutual cooperation.

### **Expatriates or Locals: Sources of Employees for Key Positions in a Foreign Subsidiary**

An argument in favor of the employment of expatriates in foreign subsidiaries is the relatively thin local market with respect to qualified staff of managers with international experience. This is confirmed by the “Corporate Relocation Survey.”<sup>2</sup> The problem of a “competence gap” (Kawka and Listwan, 2010:102) in host countries refers equally to less developed countries and countries with a low level of higher education that remain attractive to investors due to their low cost of labor, land, and raw materials. Similar conclusions can be found in the of “World at Work” report (*Playing to Win...*, 2007:5) which states that the supply of qualified employees in dynamically developing emerging markets is insufficient and two-thirds of international corporations indicate problems in finding key employees for their subsidiaries.

The practice of international enterprises employing expats shows that those companies are focused on knowledge transfer and the development of a global managerial staff (“Strategic Moves,” 2012; “Cartus Pulse Survey,” 2011; Cerdin, 2007; Scullion and Collings, 2006:41). They are one of the most important motives for their

1 Pursuant to a survey by Ernst & Young, Poland will be the second most attractive country in Europe, after Germany, for locating investments over the next three years, and the inflow of foreign financial capital to Poland will result in the arrival of expatriates—specialists, experts, and managers. Ernst & Young, 2013, “European Attractiveness Survey,” <<http://www.ey.com/attractiveness>>.

2 <<http://www.atlasworldgroup.com>> as accessed September 20, 2013.

expansion abroad. Thus, staffing in foreign companies depends on expat-specific competencies that combine knowledge and managerial competence with cultural competence (Black and Gregersen, 1999:52).

Similarly, according to M. Schaffer et al. (1999:558), in spite of the significant costs of expat maintenance and numerous cases of expatriation failures, international companies will increase the use of the services of such employees not only for the traditionally mentioned reasons of the necessity of controlling local operations and expert knowledge transfer from headquarters to a subsidiary. It is also about facilitating the company's entry into new markets and developing international management competence among managers. A similar opinion is shared by P. Dowling et al. (2008:88). According to these authors, if the corporation's resources include managers with the required competencies and intercultural experience who are able to manage subsidiaries abroad, then such a corporation will use their services and work.

Opponents of employing expats in subsidiaries mainly present the argument of the costs of foreign assignment preparation and attribute the role of "watchdogs" to expats who follow and control the implementation of guidelines from headquarters instead of considering them as value added to the resources and human potential of a given subsidiary (Min Toh, 2007:187).

The cost of a one-year foreign contract for an expatriate from the United States is almost three times higher than such a person's annual compensation in their home country. Such a practice is true for 54% of American corporations. The cheapest expatriates in the case of long-term contracts are Europeans (*A Global Talent...*, 2012). Earlier estimates by G. Wederspahn (1992:28) demonstrated that the annual cost of expatriate contract performance in London for a manager of an American corporation earning \$100,000 on average equaled about \$300,000. Similarly, Y. McNulty and Tharenou (2009) estimated that the average cost of relocation of an American manager-expatriate working on the basis of three-year contract (with the assumption that their base annual compensation equals about \$75,000–\$100,000) may reach up to one million dollars.

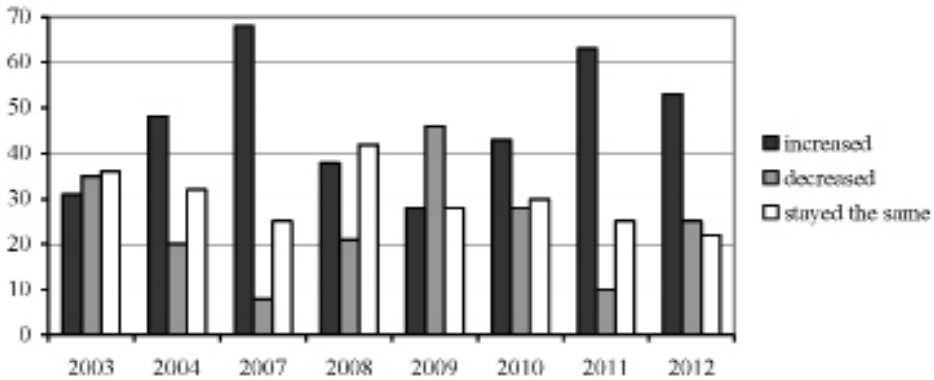
Moreover, the high expatriation failure index induces corporations to select local managers. Pursuant to different researchers, the expatriation failure rate equals about 16%–50% (A. W. Harzing, 1995), 20%–40% (C. Solomon, 1996), 30%–50% (J. S. Black and M. Mendenhal, 1991), and about 50% (H. Allerton, 1997). Pursuant to the research by GMAC/Brookfield, this statistic is in the 4%–10% range.

The development of technology is behind the fact that Internet-based communications are currently of priority significance. Thanks to them, geographical

distances are no larger of importance. Thus, it reduces the demand for physical presence of managers–expatriates.

However, in spite of the fact that it is much more expensive to employ an expatriate than a local manager, the demand for their services has not declined. The results of research by GMAC/Brookfield Global Relocation Services shows that the expatriate population is growing, which is connected with the dynamic development of international business (Chart No. 1).

**Chart No. 1.** International Expatriate Population Growth Rate (data in %)



Source: <<http://www.brookfieldgrs.com>>.

In spite of a decrease in the existing upward trend over the years 2008–2009 (the result of the worldwide crisis and tendencies in international corporations to limit expenditures and search for savings), forecasts concerning successive years are still optimistic. The upward trend of the expatriate population is also confirmed by the “Strategic Moves 2012” survey. According to 60% of respondents, the number of expats will increase over successive years.<sup>3</sup>

According to a report by Pedersen & Partners, almost every third company in the world (27.5%) declares that it employs more expats than it did five years ago. A total of 81% of the surveyed companies admitted that the economic crisis was of zero or little importance in terms of the scope of expatriation policy. However, a decrease in the employment of expats was noted in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, including Poland and the Czech Republic.<sup>4</sup>

3 <<http://www.delloite.co.uk>>.

4 <<http://www.pedersenandpartners.com>>.

### SWOT Analysis: Expatriates

The reasons behind the choice between an expat and a local manager depend on the perspective and planned business of headquarters and the subsidiary (Scullion and Collings, 2006:25; Mead, 2011:465). P. Thareneou and M. Harvey add that local managers protect an international corporation against various risks arising from a lack of appropriate response to the local environment while foreign managers may provide competencies and sometimes contribute to the development of the first group to facilitate their future promotion (as cited in Mead, 2011:463).

At this point, it is worth assessing manager–expatriate strengths and weaknesses as well as the opportunities and threats that arise from the environment in which such managers operate. Such an analysis may serve as a reference point for opinions obtained from Polish managers.

A personal SWOT analysis covering expatriates gives the possibility of evaluating their potential with reference to an assessment of strengths (S), weaknesses (W), opportunities (O), and threats (T). The results of such a diagnosis make it possible to use employee strengths when confronted with the opportunities created by the external environment of the organization, to neutralize the weaknesses inherent in human potential, and to eliminate the threats posed by the environment.

The strengths found in staff potential mainly refer to competencies held by employees that determine the competitive advantage of a company. It is possible to identify generally occurring strengths—competencies or features held by the majority of international employees—as well as “differentiating competencies”—competencies held by only a small group of staff (Stor, 2010:205; Poczowski, 2008:118). The first group of expat strengths may include international managerial experience, mobility, knowledge of foreign languages, and knowledge of different corporate functional areas. They constitute what may be termed “hard” competencies that form the selection criteria for such staff most often. The differentiating competencies may include flexibility and cultural intelligence, motivation behind assignment (a passion for learning), adaptability to other national cultures, global mindset, and communicability beyond cultural differences. However, it should be added that such features are reinforced by the cultural context in which a given person acquired them (the national culture of the expat’s country of origin) or will be able to reinforce them in the future as a part of work in a given country (in the country of assignment or in the home country of the corporate headquarters).

Expatriate weaknesses are those qualities that significantly reduce the effectiveness of foreign assignments or preclude the efficient operation of a subsidiary.

They may include a feeling of superiority towards the local staff (ethnocentrism) triggering conflicts and undermining the morale of subsidiary employees, personal and family problems, stereotypization, culture shock, and problems with adaptation encountered by an expat and expat family members. The expatriates' weaknesses determine their competence shortage and these are the reasons for expatriation failures.

Having decided to participate in foreign assignments, expatriates face numerous opportunities provided by the external environment that will be both a challenge for them and a way to further develop their careers. They include destinations in emerging markets that, though problematic (due to geographical distance, climatic problems, communication infrastructure, etc.), are still a "blue ocean" that has not yet been developed by any other organization. The expat's experience acquired while working on such markets will be a unique one.

The opportunities provided by foreign assignments also include networking—the creation of a network of international interpersonal relationships, transfer of organization knowledge, and new communication technologies facilitating the decision-making process between geographically distant branches of a corporation.

Threats to staff potential may occur both in the external and internal environment of the organization. With respect to foreign assignments, they may take on the form of political risks (wars and terrorist attacks in the host country), which decrease the level of a sense of security for investments and expats. Furthermore, a constant threat facing international corporations is the emergence of new competitors on the host market who may cause a drainage of expatriate staff and their leaving for more attractive organizations (together with their knowledge and experience). Other phenomena and events that may adversely influence the formation of expatriate staff potential include the growing importance of location and the use of local managers—HCN, the change in the psychological contract and decrease in expatriate loyalty to the organization as well as the use of flexpatriate contracts (Mayrhofer et al., 2004; Mayrhofer et al., 2010).

It should be noted that the map of references and contexts of operations of an international company, with its analysis of all SWOT elements, is very complex. However, it should include the largest possible number of subfunctions for managing the manager-expatriate staff in order to define the strengths and weaknesses of such staff occurring in the environment of an international company.

## Expatriate Strengths and Weaknesses: The Point of View of Local Managers

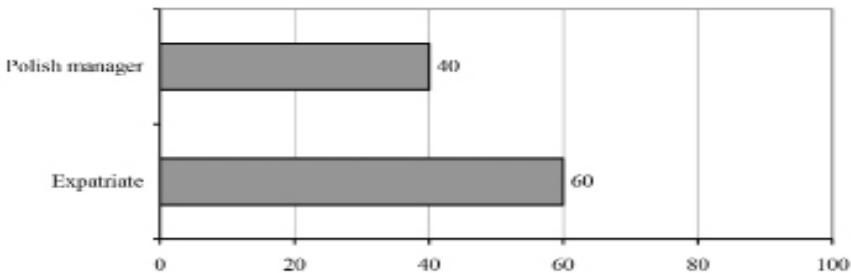
A project entitled “Perception of Managers–Expatriates by Polish Managerial Staff” was undertaken at the beginning of 2013. The research technique was in the form of a structured interview questionnaire. Research questions referred to:

- 1) Expatriate strengths and weaknesses in the area of competencies,
- 2) Organizational culture,
- 3) Nonprofessional interpersonal relations among expats and local employees,
- 4) Communication, and
- 5) The preparing of Polish successors and problems with mutual cooperation.

The survey covered a group of thirty–one Polish managers who had direct contact with an expatriate in a foreign subsidiary of a corporation in Poland. More than three–fourths of the companies that the respondents worked for were established in Poland as greenfield investments. Those managers came from seventeen major companies and they held positions at the middle (68%), higher (23%), and the highest managerial level (10%).

According to the majority of Polish managers (60%), the highest position in a Polish subsidiary is held by an expatriate (Chart No. 2).

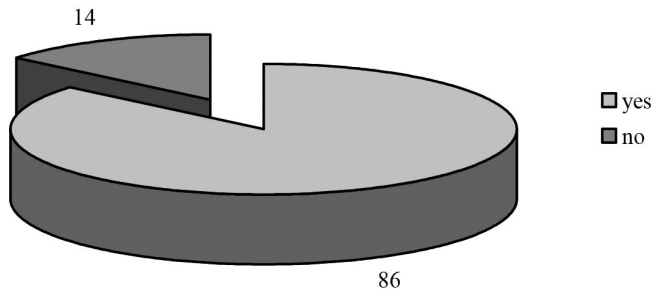
**Chart No. 2.** The Key Managerial Position in the Polish Subsidiary Is Occupied by... (data in %)



Source: Own research.

As much as 86% of Polish managers (Chart No. 3) thinks that expatriates are needed in Polish subsidiaries and it is for this reason that they were asked to assess their strengths (Chart No. 3).

**Chart No. 3.** Are Expatriate–Managers Needed in the Polish Subsidiary?  
(data in %)



Source: Own research.

In their answers, Polish staff indicated the following strengths of such staff most often: International Experience:

- “Expatriate experience horizons are wide, they have usually worked in several countries,” and

- “Expatriates know Western practices and standards with respect to staff management,”

Additionally, Polish staff emphasized roles of expatriates as ambassadors and liaisons between headquarters and a subsidiary:

- “Expatriates usually have contacts at headquarters and the corporate culture is rooted in their minds” and “They are singled out with their knowledge of procedures and corporate methods of work.”

Yet, the highest number of strengths referred to expatriate knowledge and competencies:

- “They are often depositories of know–how and are experts in a given area, they also have the ability to transfer their knowledge to others,”

- “They are very good at foreign languages (English, French, and German) and, at the same time, they are very communicative,” and

- “They may transfer knowledge, innovation, as well as proven products and solutions (in the countries they have worked in that are not widespread in Poland, yet).”

As to the weaknesses of expatriates working in Polish companies, what Polish managers emphasized most often was the lack of knowledge of local market realities:

- “Poor knowledge of Polish regulations, work culture, and national culture as well as a lack of knowledge of the Polish language.”



According to one of the respondents, “in the initial phase of their stay in Poland, it is easy to notice their stereotypical thinking, which looks whether Poles do not threaten their positions in the parent company. When they stay longer, it is helpful to understand the simple fact that Poland is similar in many respects to the place of their origin (my experience is limited to expats from Western Europe and the United States).”

Mutual cooperation is also problematic due to a lack of flexibility (Przytula, 2013:51) when making decisions:

- “Expats see new ideas from an angle of potential risks, not opportunities, and therefore the time for making a decision is longer or there are no decisions made, whatsoever.”

According to Polish managers, numerous restrictions are the result of the individual qualities and personality traits of those managers, such as ethnocentrism, local chauvinism, and xenophobia:

- “They love only themselves and therefore they accept only their own French solutions, they consider themselves as experts in all areas,”

- “For local staff, they are masters of demotivation,” and

- “They are closed off in their circles, egoistic, and distrustful of Poles.”

The expat weakness that hinders the development of local employees and their motivation for work is very often the excessive hierarchization and emphasis on structuring of tasks:

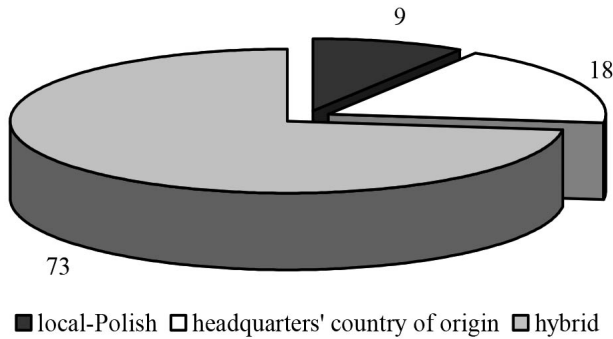
- “They lack flexibility, follow the rules and procedures strictly, and formalize whatever they can,”

- “They lack ideas and solutions in atypical situations,” and

- “They usually occupy high positions and therefore they force through the solutions they know and are accustomed to.”

The issue of reasons for the low effectiveness of expatriates working in the subsidiaries of foreign corporations operating in Poland was also examined by M. Rozkwitalska (2012) and M. Krasieński (2014).

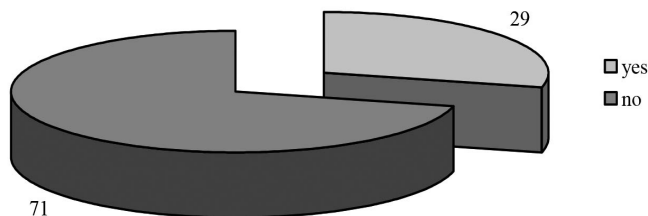
According to almost three-fourth of Polish managers (73%), neither organizational nor local culture or culture from the country of headquarters dominate in a subsidiary. Rather, the mixing of those cultures (hybrid culture) tends to be seen.

**Chart No. 4.** Organizational Culture in Polish Subsidiaries (data in %)

Source: Own research.

The respondents specified certain rituals that bring together the cultural values of the countries of a subsidiary and of headquarters. They include “Easter and Christmas celebrations divided into traditional dishes from Polish and German cuisine” and the organization of “American Days”—outdoor weekend events for Polish employees and their families. Expat offices may feature symbols of their national cultures: an American flag on the desk, a framed quote from Confucius in the office of a Japanese director, or a small collection of wines from French vineyards in one of the subsidiaries of a French corporation.

However, in spite of numerous examples of the integration of cultures, there are not many Polish managers who have nonprofessional relations with an expat or an expat family (Chart No. 5).

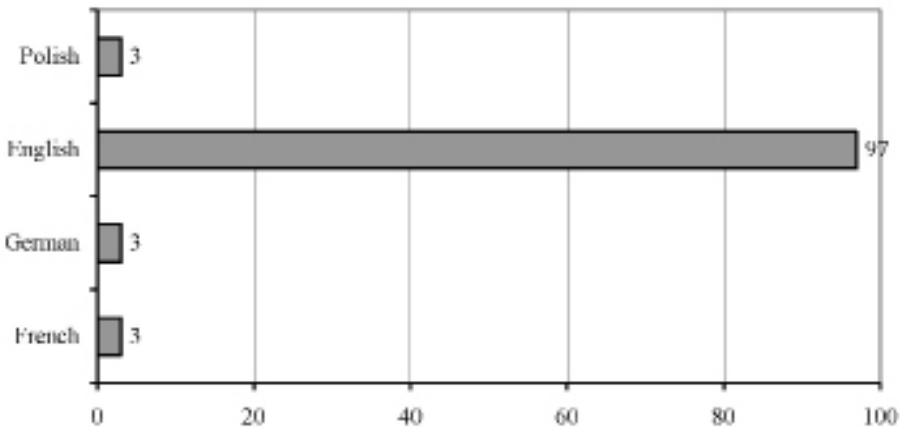
**Chart No. 5.** Do You Have Nonprofessional Relations with an Expat or Expat Family? (data in %)

Source: Own research.

The respondents believe that the reason for such a significant gap in nonprofessional relationships is that the expats often consider their stay working in Poland as temporary or a transitory condition and therefore do not want to get emotionally involved and “invest” in deeper relationships with Polish colleagues. It is especially at the beginning of their stay in Poland that expats are distressed as a result of the lack of acquaintances and friends. Still, they prefer their own circle of “assigned persons” to Polish acquaintances. In several companies, the employees of HR departments were responsible for organizing meetings with other expatriates from the same country of origin working in the same locality. They were occasional meetings during which expats could share their first impressions as to their stay in Poland and benefit from advice on dos and don’ts in Poland.

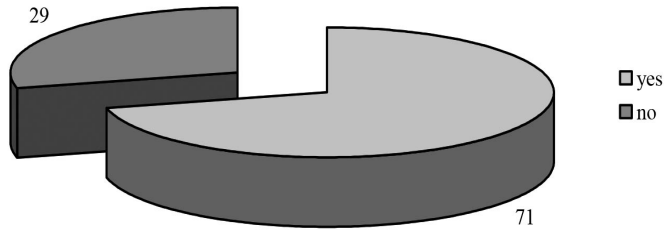
The language of communication between expatriates and Polish employees is English in 97% of cases (Chart No. 6), but expats also learn Polish (in more than half of the companies it is obligatory for expatriates to learn the local language and is included in their scope of obligations).

**Chart No. 6.** Language of Communication among Expatriates and Polish Staff (data in %)



Source: Own research (the data does not total 100% as the respondents could give more than one answer).

Moreover, according to 71% of Polish managers, expats in the surveyed companies learn Polish (Chart No. 7), but with varying results. Nevertheless, Poles appreciate the effort devoted by foreigners to this issue, which facilitates the establishment of good interpersonal relationships in their workgroups.

**Chart No. 7.** Do Expatriates Learn the Polish Language? (data in %)

Source: Own research.

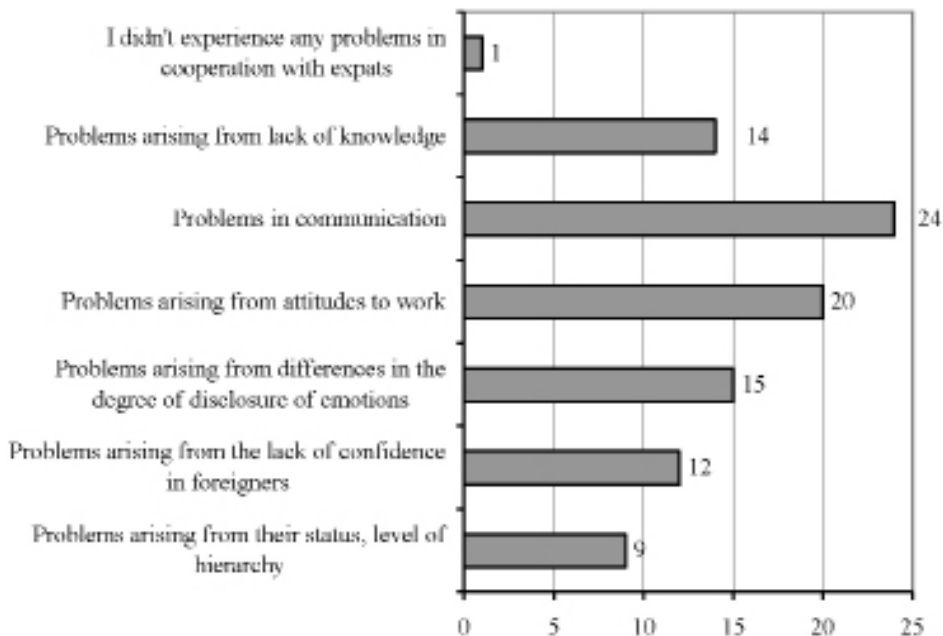
However, a summary of the problems regarding mutual cooperation among Polish managers and expats (Chart No. 8) reveals that the issue of communication is clearly neglected or even ignored by the expats themselves. In a majority of cases, expats were obliged to learn the Polish language, although the business language used in Polish subsidiaries is the English language. Coming to a foreign country for a period of one to three years necessitates the learning of the local language. This is not only because of the necessities of daily life, but also to foster the efficient management of the personnel that is 99% Polish.

Knowledge of the local language influences the perception of foreigners by local employees positively. This is confirmed by a survey conducted by J. Eisenberg et al. (2009:4) on the leadership styles among managers–expatriates in Poland. According to the survey, expatriates were viewed as being sensitive, tolerant, open, and friendly. However, 65% of Polish employees think that knowledge of the Polish language would give the managers from Western Europe greater approval and more sympathy from their Polish subordinates.

According to 24% of Polish managers, the most frequent problems (Chart No. 8) occurring in mutual cooperation with expats includes communication problems involving knowledge of the language, various verbal and nonverbal behaviors, problems arising from different work attitudes (e.g., attitude with respect to time, formalization of interpersonal relationships) (20%), problems arising from lack of knowledge (e.g., knowledge of Polish financial laws, labor law, incomprehension of Polish customs, religion) (14%).

Interviews with Polish managers reveal that each of the surveyed organization hosts a group of expats rather than individuals. They hold key positions in the majority of functional areas in Polish subsidiaries and tend not to prepare their Polish successors. Polish staff notices that although “the banners of expatriate assignment” announce the development of Polish staff, the preparation of Polish successors is not noticeable in practice.

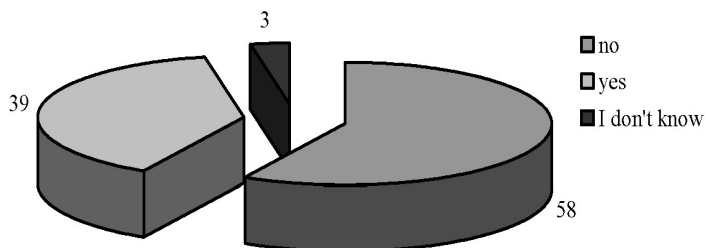
**Chart No. 8.** Problems in Mutual Cooperation among Polish and Foreign Managers (data in %)



Source: Own research.

The following opinion was noted during one of the interviews: “I have the impression that some positions will always be occupied by expats, e.g., a factory director in Poland. While such countries as France or Italy, where we also operate, are perceived as mature markets and the local personnel fills the highest positions in subsidiaries located there much earlier.”

**Chart No. 9.** Do Expats Prepare Polish Staff to Take Over Their Functions as a Part of the Managing of the Entire Subsidiary? (data in %)



Source: Own research.

## Conclusions

The local perspective assumed in this article emphasizes that expatriates' roles are particularly important from the point of view of the staff of a given subsidiary, such as "watchdog" (Min Toh, 2009) or "transfer channel" (Cerdin, 2007).

According to the majority of Polish managers, expats are needed in subsidiaries in Poland. Thus, the summary of pros and cons of their presence in Polish subsidiaries gives a positive result. Expats' knowledge and significant experience are their strengths and Polish managers unquestionably benefit from this during their everyday work with expats in workgroups. In spite of the emphasized weaknesses, which are mainly related to personality, expats are a valuable find for Polish subsidiaries.

However, the collected opinions given by Polish managers allow the formulation of several suggestions or recommendations for future expats whose foreign assignments take them to Poland:

- Being open to the "otherness" of Polish culture, which according to specific opinions signifies: "Greater trust in Polish employees and their knowledge and experience; being open to Polish organizational and legal restrictions; being an anthropologist and not a colonizer; the ability to adapt work methods to local circumstances; a willingness to learn Polish culture and language."

- Avoiding ethnocentrism with respect to Polish staff, signifying: "Refraining from the forced transfer of foreign practices, and suspending their status and professional position at headquarters for the contract period in Poland."

- Greater local integration. In the opinion of Poles, "expatriates, especially at the beginning of their stay, experience loneliness. They usually establish relationships in the circle of company employees and this is not enough to adapt to a new culture. A drink after work would solve 99% of the problems with integration."

- Respect and trust, meaning: "Respect for local cultural values and refraining from behavior that may imply a lack of respect for Poland and Poles, in any way whatsoever. Polish managers think that expatriates should first observe their surroundings and company operations, and win the trust of local employees before starting any introduction of radical changes requiring such trust."

Bearing in mind the initial phase of internationalization of Polish companies (Karaszewski, 2010) and the willingness of the Polish managerial staff to start operations and competition on the global labor market, the intellectual capital and experience offered by expats is worth using. Over the past two market economy decades—a very short time when compared to world standards—not many Polish managers have had the opportunity to develop their careers in the international arena acquiring significant experience in management. It can also be stated that

expats are the stepping–stones for Poles in their global careers. It is the experience, knowledge, and management style of these expats, presently staying in Poland, that may be used by Polish staff.

### Limitations:

The analysis in the paper is primarily limited because of the small sample of respondents. These research findings cannot be spread and generalized in relation to all expatriates working in Poland.

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### **Postrzeżenie ekspatriantów przez lokalną kadrę menedżerską – korzyści i problemy we wzajemnej współpracy**

#### Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu będzie ocena mocnych i słabych stron ekspatów w polskich filiach dokonana przez lokalnych menedżerów oraz diagnoza korzyści i problemów wynikających ze wzajemnej współpracy polskich i zagranicznych menedżerów w filiach korporacji międzynarodowych działających w Polsce.

Projekt badawczy pt. Postrzeżenie menedżerów–ekspatriantów przez polską kadrę kierowniczą, był realizowany na początku 2013 roku. Badanie objęło grupę 31 polskich menedżerów, którzy mieli kontakt bezpośredni z ekspatriantem w filii zagranicznej korporacji w Polsce i którzy mogli ocenić tę wzajemną współpracę.

Techniką badawczą był ustrukturalizowany kwestionariusz wywiadu. Pytania dotyczyły mocnych i słabych stron ekspatriantów w obszarze kwalifikacji, kultury organizacyjnej, pozazawodowych relacji interpersonalnych między ekspatami a lokalnymi pracownikami, komunikowania się, przygotowywania polskich sukcesorów oraz problemów występujących we wzajemnej współpracy.

Rezultaty badań pozwalają na stwierdzenie, że ekspaci są potrzebni w filiach w Polsce. Bilans „pros and cons” ich obecności w polskich filiach, wypada dodatnio. Mocną stroną ekspatów i niewątpliwą korzyścią, jaką zyskują polscy menedżerowie współpracujący z nimi na co dzień, jest wiedza i bogate doświadczenie ekspatów. Mimo podkreślanych słabości, głównie o charakterze osobowościowym, ekspaci są więc cennym nabytkiem dla polskich fili.

Sylwia Przytuła – Ph.D. in economics, Assistant professor with the Department of Human Resource Management at the Wrocław University of Economics. Research and scientific interests include expatriation, international HRM, and the cultural differences in global business. A member of SIETAR Poland (Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research). Author and co-author of dozens of scientific publications in Polish and English (co-author of *Global Talent Management: Management for Professionals*, A. Al Ariss, Editor, 2014). Participated in numerous international study visits and internships for academics: International College Program (Orlando, Florida, U.S.A.), Erasmus University (The Netherlands), Aalborg University (Denmark), University of Cagliari (Sardinia), Porto University (Portugal), Malta University, and ESCIP School of International Business (France).