

Female Assignees: Lessons Learned

By Cornelius Grove and Willa Hallowell

Women increasingly are entering professional careers, and career advancement increasingly depends on international experience and knowledge. So it's not surprising that corporate leaders, as well as ambitious women, are frequently asking, "To what extent is it advisable to send female professionals on overseas assignments?"

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This question arises out of a concern that female assignees may pose some sort of risk. And that wariness of risk arises, in turn, out of assumptions about what might happen when a woman serves her company as an expatriate. The two of us believe that these assumptions are grounded in a couple of myths about female assignees. We'll begin by stating each myth in turn, then showing that the truth often is different from what many have imagined.

Myth 1: Overseas, local males will treat American females very much like they treat local females.

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This statement arises out of irritation over the way women, in general, are treated in many other cultures, and is based on Americans' assumption that males abroad can be expected to treat all females — locals, Americans, whomever — virtually identically. Now it is accurate that women in many other cultures have been dealt with by their own countrymen in ways that many Americans find objectionable. And, it's understandable that we would not want to oblige our women to endure such treatment. So far, so good.

Where this statement becomes mythical is in its assumption that men in those cultures automatically treat expatriate women just as they treat local women. Our research, like that of others, has found that in the preponderance of cases, local males do not mentally classify a foreign woman in the same way as they classify local women. In fact, expatriate professional females can have an advantage in being, at first, outside the locals' normal classification system. This point is so important that we'll return to it at the end of this article.

Myth 2: Local (male) co-workers might create performance barriers for the female expat; if so, her expat co-workers will be the ones she can turn to for solace and support.

This myth extends the first one into the professional arena. Conscious or unconscious barriers erected by local males might hinder a female assignee's business effectiveness . . . in which

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case she at least can rely on her fellow American expats. But our interviews reveal an ironically different story. It turns out that many women who encounter significant barriers are more likely to complain about their fellow expat male co-workers.

These women tell us that American males who have been on overseas assignments for many years actually erect the highest barriers because their mentality remains grounded in the U.S. of the 1950s and early 1960s. These women also say that local co-workers can be very supportive of female expatriates if their respect and good-will is carefully cultivated.

Personal Attributes as Liabilities Abroad

These two myths lead corporate leaders and ambitious women to wonder whether the attribute of being female may be a liability for an American business expatriate abroad. Time for a reality check. If personal attributes are the focus of concern, we can point to three that actually are more likely to be a liability than being female. These are (1) being single, (2) being young, and (3) being culturally American.

Being single is a liability because both local people and fellow expatriates often don't know how to comfortably fit a single person into their social lives. (This might be more troublesome when the single expat is female.) In our experience, some singles who do not wish to go unaccompanied to bars and clubs — which might be a wise choice — end up coping with deep loneliness. Some compensate by working at the office on evenings and weekends, which leads to burnout and a loss of perspective on life . . . and can lower the esteem that family-minded locals have for single expatriates.

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Regarding youth, let's recall that youthfulness is valued in American culture, whereas the tradition and wisdom associated with age is more valued in other, especially non-Western, cultures. The American tendency, therefore, is to promote "fast-trackers" up the ladder and to send them abroad at a relatively young age to be in charge of something. But this makes people in some other cultures uncomfortable, even resistant; their expectation is that seniority in rank is closely linked with seniority in age.

American-ness as a liability? Yes. Any number of cultural experts over the years have noted that the traits often associated with success in U.S. business culture — task orientation, constant focus on time, competitiveness, directness, etc. — are less characteristic of many other cultures, and are consciously disapproved of by some. Cross-cultural specialists devote much effort to coaching future expats, especially the males, to tone down these characteristics in favor of others that are, well . . . more "female."

“Femaleness” as an Asset

This is a key point. The traits generally associated with females in the U.S. — consensus-building, relationship-orientation, greater sensitivity to non-verbal cues, etc. — are more like the traits valued in many other cultures, especially non-Western ones. This gives female assignees an advantage.

We believe that American women have a second advantage as expatriates: They are accustomed to operating in a system in which the preponderance of power is held by people unlike themselves — that is, by men — with the result that many businesswomen have learned to attain their goals through influence, collaboration, and sensitivity to the points-of-view of others. These skills will serve them well abroad. In our view, many American businesswomen have had career-long, cross-cultural, on-the-job training for expatriate assignments.

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We must return to the potential liabilities of American-ness for a moment. One feature of our 1990s mindset in the U.S. is a certain hypersensitivity regarding gender-equality and gender-related political correctness. This hypersensitivity might be necessary, even inevitable, during the gradual evolution of U.S. culture toward true egalitarianism. But, it is not understood in many other parts of the world, where male-dominant arrangements have prevailed virtually unquestioned for hundreds or even thousands of years. Women (and men) who enter another country as a business guest ready to reform local values can expect polite acquiescence on the surface . . . and stiff resentment underneath. Not a good basis for business success. We suggest this: Committed gender-role reformers should remain here in the U.S. to help advance our own historical transformation.

Two of the women we interviewed for this article were exceptionally experienced overseas, not only as high ranking professionals on two or more continents, but also as expatriate spouses. One said, “There’s always a fine line between respecting cross-cultural sensitivities on the one hand, and being your most effective professional self, as you’ve come to understand this (in the U.S.) on the other hand.” The other, who talked of the preeminence of attaining the business objectives that you went abroad to accomplish, said simply, “If your goal overseas is never, ever to be offended because of your gender, give up!”

A Unique Mental Classification

Many female expats, especially those outside Western culture, report that local males “at first didn’t know how to react to me.” The successful ones say that, over time, they seemed to become “a member of a third gender” or “an honorary male.”

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female co-worker." Therefore, the males are ^{not} likely to deal with her in the same way that they tend to deal with a local female. This is an advantage because the expat is free to consciously build a unique classification for herself in the minds of local people. On the basis of our research and experience, we have developed a set of ten guidelines for female assignees who would like to try to do this.

1. In general, emphasize your female qualities (collaboration, intuitiveness, relationship-orientation etc.).
2. In general, de-emphasize your American traits (high task-orientation, preoccupation with time, etc.).
3. Leave behind, in the U.S., any hypersensitivity you might feel regarding gender issues.
4. Be prepared to work within a system where people are more formal and respectful of authority than in the U.S. (This can affect you as a subordinate and/or as a boss.)
5. Doing your job with high technical competence will win you points with local co-workers and with your male expat colleagues.
6. Eagerness to be with, and learn new things from, locals will gain you their admiration and their support; your most memorable experiences abroad may well be the outcome.
7. Build bridges as soon as possible to the most supportive male expatriates.
8. Build bridges to other female expats in your company and in other Western firms (but avoid complaint sessions), and join clubs and interest groups from Day 1.
9. Take steps to learn the local language, and demonstrate your knowledge often.
10. An understanding and supportive boss, even in advance of your arrival, is a huge asset.

(We know that this tenth point mentions something rarely controlled by an expat, but we felt compelled to include it because the female expats we interviewed often said it's a key factor.)

The bad news is that many U.S. businesses may have unnecessarily missed opportunities in the past to send their female colleagues on overseas assignments. The good news is that it's becoming increasingly clearer that women may be very good choices to go abroad, and that, in the absence of unique family or local impediments, businesses definitely should encourage and support their outstanding career women to consider an expatriate assignment.

Cornelius Grove and Willa Hallowell are the partners of Cornelius Grove & Associates, LLC. With their mature, experienced associates, they specialize in assignments that help people from different cultures work together productively to better attain the global objectives of a firm. For more information, contact them by phoning (718) 492-1896 or faxing (718) 492-4005, or by consulting CGA's Website at <http://www.grovewell.com>.

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