

The International Management Assessment: how to choose international managers?

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The International Management Assessment (IMA) is a process based on the assessment centre principle. Its aim is to assist organisations in the selection and preparation of their managers for an international career or assignments overseas. The IMA was designed originally from the experience of international assignments with large French companies, taking account of the specific profiles and aptitudes required of international managers. This enabled us, with the support of research studies, to define the main criteria to be observed in the behaviour desirable for these types of assignments, and to implement in multinational companies in France and elsewhere in Europe the whole assessment process for international managers.

The profile of an international manager

Many international companies have the problem of how to choose managers for operations abroad. This is partly due to the fact that some of the abilities required are different from those needed at home. There may be two main reasons for this.

First, the job to be done is not necessarily the same as in the home country; (very often, it concerns a new project, a new plant, a new subsidiary. It is a job of design, of creation, sometimes a pioneer's job. This is very different from a routine job, applying procedures with the support of colleagues and a full staff. For instance, in the utilities sector, three main profiles can be distinguished for operations abroad, which may be true also for other sectors:

- **project leader:** has to study the feasibility and to make the design of a new operation abroad, or to audit an existing operation before being taken over, to find the funding, to negotiate with many foreign partners, to build up joint-ventures, to make the business plan; and all this in a different cultural and legal environment.
- **operations manager:** often has to organise or lead the launch of a new service or handle a take-over, or acquisition. This means making urgent decisions, such as the appointment of new people to take charge and the implementation of a new organisation. At the same time, it is necessary to satisfy the expectations of the government, the personnel, the customers, the media and public opinion, all the while being under constant scrutiny when arriving in the foreign country.
- **expert:** has to participate as a specialist in various stages of a project, such as providing technical assistance to the preliminary studies or audits, advising on negotiations or on the (re)organisation of the operation, and later on to its development by means of specialised studies, advice and training support, again taking into account the cultural context.

Particular abilities and aptitudes for international operations

These particular situations abroad require specific abilities, which can be developed by training. These abilities can be classified into two groups: *international communication* and *international operations*. Among the first group we may find linguistic abilities, knowledge of intercultural factors and ways of transferring know-how. In the second group, we can find the abilities to participate successfully in the various stages of international operations, such as the design and implementation of projects with foreign partners and international agencies, leading consultancy projects abroad, or organising a take-over.

But international operations also require other aptitudes, which are common to all professional competences and skills. These additional, more cross-functional aptitudes include the ability to analyse complex situations and make decisions in an uncertain context, an aptitude for learning from the difficulties met, for negotiation, for conflict management, as well as diplomacy and adaptability.

In terms of adaptability, the focus is on adaptation to a foreign culture. It is obvious that hierarchical relations, relations in the company with individuals or groups, relations within a team, time management, attitudes to information or to status and other aspects may be broadly different from one country to another, even within Europe. These factors can be called cultural differentiation criteria, and of course there are cultural trends in every country.

But at the same time, any individual may be representative, or not, of their own national culture. He or she may have a behaviour or working style which is different (or partly different) from the national trends of their own country. First, for personal reasons - genetic or psychological factors, life experience - but also for cultural reasons, which are not related to a nation, but to other communities one may belong to: a social class, a profession, a religion, even a company with a strong identity.

Consequently, the problem is not only to know the cultural differences in one or more foreign countries, it is also to know oneself and one's working style; and finally to know how to manage one's behaviour and working style when working with another culture.

Criteria for choosing international managers

What then are the criteria we should be using when selecting potential international managers? Four sets of criteria can be considered:

- **professional experience and competences** usually required in the field of the foreign posting or assignment; these remain probably the most important criteria, and are certainly a sine qua non as far as the company is concerned
- **the individual's motivation for an international career**, as well as his or her family situation and the family's motivation for living and working abroad.
- **specific abilities for international communication and international operations**, as described above.
- **additional aptitudes for operations abroad**, including adaptation to a foreign culture, or the ability to manage one's own values and cultural preferences in another cultural context. This last group of criteria is developed below.

The International Management Assessment – objectives and criteria

The International Management Assessment (IMA) tool has been developed to focus particularly on these additional aptitudes and cultural attitudes for international operations. Its aim is to enable the future international manager and his or her company to assess their aptitudes for this type of assignment. The IMA is not sufficient by itself to choose international managers, because professional and linguistic competences and personal and family motivation are also important, but it gives essential information to help in this choice.

Based on the assessment centre principle, the IMA is a process which provides a personal diagnosis of a person's aptitudes for working in a different cultural context and with international responsibilities.

In summary, the objectives of the IMA process are to enable every potential international manager:

- **To know their own strengths and weaknesses regarding the aptitudes which are essential for working in an international context. The ones particularly focused on in the IMA are:**
 - *analysis of a complex situation*, where partners, value systems and mental systems are different, and where information is presented in another form and/or is unclear or uncertain
 - *making decisions in an uncertain context*, when the manager has to decide based on information which is incomplete or uncertain, and has to be ready to support the consequences of that choice (for instance, to sign an agreement abroad)
 - *readiness for learning*, having an open mind and curiosity, a listening attitude, and also the ability to recognise and learn from mistakes when implementing new solutions
 - *adaptability*, being able to face unusual situations and partners with values different from yours, and to stick to the objective even though the means to reach it have to be changed
 - *diplomacy*, knowing how to give a message in such a way that the counterpart can understand and accept it
 - *negotiation*, how to identify what may be won or lost by you and your counterpart, and to plan and implement an appropriate strategy
 - *conflict management*, how to deal with conflicting situations in a non aggressive way.
- **To know their own working style and their own preferences regarding the main cultural differentiation criteria**, which have been documented by writers such as Hofstede, Hall and Hall, D'Iribarne, Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner and others, and which enable us to position various countries according to the following criteria:

- *hierarchical relations*, high power distance vs partnership
- *relations within the company*, individualism vs sense of community
- *relations within the team*, assertiveness and competition, or looking for harmony and consensus
- *time management*, doing one thing at the same time with a sequential and planned schedule, or being more spontaneous and flexible.
- *attitude to information*, formal and explicit communication, or informal and implicit
- *attitude to status*, status which is merited and based on achievement, or status by ascription (according to your background and where you come from)

This analysis enables every manager concerned to realise why and where their ways of working and cultural preferences may fit with the culture of some countries, and why and where they will need to make an effort - and what kind of effort - to adapt to the national culture encountered.

- o **To assess a person's suitability or likely level of success in assignments to specific countries**
- o **To define their own action plan for progress, in particular for training and coaching**

The IMA process

The process used in the IMA is divided into three phases:

Phase 1 – Observation and diagnosis

The diagnoses come out of a series of simulations, which involve full and active participation. The simulations are based on the situations international managers will have to face during their international assignments. These situations are for instance: negotiations with foreign partners, meetings for preparing joint-ventures, assessment of foreign staff, planning and choosing priorities, all in a different organisational and cultural context.

These simulations are performed during a full intensive day, consisting of cases-studies, roles-plays, group-discussions, interviews, designed in such a way that the participants' actions and behaviour which emerge during the exercises can be assessed according to the criteria presented above. These behaviours are closely observed and noted by two consultants. The criteria to be observed may have been previously adapted to the company's demand from those proposed above; in this case, the simulation exercises have also to be adapted accordingly.

The simulations are organised on a group basis, with a successive series of individual pair or whole group exercises. The IMA is usually arranged for a group of four participants, who are observed by two consultants. At the end of the day, a summary sheet is given to the participants, which presents and defines the chosen criteria, and they are asked individually to give a self-diagnosis of their behaviour related to these criteria.

Phase 2 - Analysis

A thorough analysis of these observations is then the biggest part in the consultants' work load. The analysis is carried out first separately by each of them, then jointly by both of them to compare and refine their analyses, which concern the attitude of each participant related to the criteria in every exercise. A synthesis is finally produced to define the profile of each participant in the light of the chosen criteria.

Phase 3 - Feedback

A verbal feedback is then given individually to every participant by one of the two consultants during a long interview, which usually lasts several hours. This interview has three objectives. First, the feedback itself, based on the facts observed during the exercise, to tell the participant how he or she can be positioned regarding the different criteria relating to aptitudes for international assignments and their own cultural preferences. This phase is made richer by the self-diagnosis the participant had been invited to make at the end of the assessment day. The second objective is more developmental: it consists usually of more explanations about the cultural differentiation criteria and the differences the manager will face in the specific country or region to which he or she may be sent on an international assignment. The third objective is to give the participant some advice and suggestions about the ways to modify his or her behaviour for the assignment abroad and how to adapt to another culture. These last two objectives can also form the basis of pre-departure intercultural training or coaching that the participant may attend later.

Finally, an essential point is the way the company - usually the Human Resources Manager, the Career Manager or the International Operations Manager – also receives the IMA results, to assist them in choosing and/or preparing managers for international assignments. The procedure for this must have been clearly agreed before the IMA between the participant, the company and the consultant. This procedure may be a written report by the consultant: in this case, we suggest that the consultant goes through the report with the participant during the individual feedback interview, and then the participant presents this report him or herself in an interview with the HR or Career Manager. Another way, without a written report, may be that the consultant, after his interview with the participant, accompanies him to a second interview with the HR manager to support or provide extra details to the oral report given by the participant to their manager.

The IMA reliability and costs

The reliability of the IMA process is consistent with that already widely established for the simulation approach used in assessment centres. The assessment is based on the actual, observed behaviour of the participants. In an intensive day of successive simulations, the participants act spontaneously to solve the problems they are faced with; they have no time to transform or conceal their attitudes, and moreover no time – even if they tried to transform them - to do so in a consistent way. Surveys show that the simulation method used in assessment centres gives proven results with a reliability rate that is up to 70% better than results with a random selection approach. In contrast, surveys also show that personality questionnaires or psychology tests obtain a rate 15% better than a random approach. Our experience of feedback interviews shows that participants agree with the IMA results, not only because they are based on facts they can easily remember, but also because they find in this process an explanation of their own behaviour.

This reliability has a cost, which can be estimated as at least two consultant days per participant for the whole process, based on four participants (eight or more consultant days in total). The IMA also requires a commitment of one and a half days from every participant - one day for the simulations and half a day for the feedback interview with the consultant (the interview with the manager is not included here). For the consultants, the biggest part of the work is not directly visible by the client. It consists of a thorough analysis of the observations made during the day of simulations, and preparing the individual profiles, which takes about one day per participant.

This cost must be considered in the context of what is at stake for the company. Experience and research have shown that the criteria used in the IMA are often crucial for the success of an international assignment. In fact, the success obtained by a manager at home is not a guarantee for their success abroad. In large and well known international companies, many cases of conflicts and failures in expatriates' postings arise because of failings in personal attitudes abroad. These failures always result in high costs, such as the return home of the expatriated professional and family, or the losses in the operation itself, not to speak of the loss of reputation for the individual and the company.

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This article is based on an article which first appeared in *Language and Intercultural Training*, Volume 17, No 3, published by LTS Training and Consulting.

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