



**SWP 34/92 CHOOSING TO ADJUST: UK AND SWEDISH  
EXPATRIATES IN SWEDEN AND THE UK**

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## **Choosing to Adjust: UK and Swedish expatriates in Sweden and the UK**

Recent years have seen dramatic increases in global activity and global competition (Porter 1986). As multinational corporations (MNCs) increase in number and influence, so the role of the international manager in those MNCs grows in importance (Heller 1980; Prahalad and Doz 1981; Martinez and Javille 1991). The nature of expatriate work varies considerably. Five broad groupings can be identified: senior managers, prospective senior managers, specialists, graduate recruits and unskilled manual workers. This paper focuses on the first two.

There is some evidence that amongst the giant, internationally known MNCs of the developed world the use of expatriates is reducing; either because the equation between their cost and their value is being questioned (Kobrin 1988) or as an unplanned reaction to changes in the environment. Recent research by Hedlund (1990) shows that, amongst Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) at least, Swedish multinationals are tending to replace Swedes by locals or third country nationals (TCNs). This movement in the decade up to 1989 has been most pronounced for subsidiaries in the EC, where it is usually locals who have taken over from the Swedes (or have been left in charge of the acquisition). Hedlund, in a typically down to earth analysis, argues that this is probably the result of a lack of conscious strategy rather than the development of a new approach. Against this, however, it has been argued (Brewster 1991) that the increasing number of smaller companies operating internationally, particularly within trading blocs such as the European Community, and the increasing number of international companies operating from the more recently developed countries, has led to an overall increase in the number of expatriates.

Whilst the numbers may be unclear, the importance of this group is manifest. For the organisation they are extremely expensive people in crucial positions, and people whose experience becomes ever more vital at the centre; for both host country and home country they are economically important, and important for their ability to transfer technology and managerial learning; for the developing international economy they are a pre-requisite.

### **Learning or teaching?**

A great deal of literature is now available on the subject of expatriation. Much of it is concerned with the particular issues raised by *adjustment*: the process whereby the expatriate adjusts his or her behaviour to the social mores of the host culture. Coming from a rather different tradition there is an assumption in much of the international management literature that the role of the expatriate is rather to act as a conduit for more advanced and sophisticated management practices: in other words to be a form of *knowledge transfer* adjusting the working practices of the host organisation to those of the expatriate. Does the expatriate learn or teach?

This paper attempts to explore this issue: firstly, by selective exploration of the literature on adjustment and knowledge transfer and attempting to clarify the paradox involved; second by analysing the Anglo-Swedish literature and outlining research, in the UK and Sweden, which throws some light on the area, and finally by attempting to set these findings in the context of current debates on expatriation.

### **The problem of adjustment**

Much of the literature on expatriates takes almost as a given the impact of culture shock (identified by Oberg 1960; Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1962; Torbiorn 1982) and the requirement for the expatriate to adjust behaviour to that expected by the local host culture. Thus, Black and Gregerson (1991) point out that "generally, adjustment is defined .....as the degree of a person's psychological comfort with

various aspects of a new setting" quoting Black 1988; Oberg 1960 and Nicholson 1984, and state that their study adopts this usage. Nevertheless, they quickly fall into a more *everyday* usage and find themselves discussing the steps that the expatriate takes to bring his or her behaviour into line with that of the host country. Thus the process is, necessarily (see Brett, Stioh and Reilly 1992) an individual one. The studies argue that they are addressing the process of developing psychological comfort in the new environment, but this is frequently conflated into measures of the extent to which expatriates have been able to adapt their behaviour to the host environment. Taking the example used before as Black and Gregorson follow their definition by stating that, at work, once the messages have been decoded "individuals must then execute appropriate behaviours in the new work role" (p.501).

Attempts have been made to disaggregate the adjustment process into dimensions of adjustment to the general cultural environment, intercultural interaction and work and job responsibilities (Black 1988; Black, Mendenhall and Oddou 1991) or to add to those a fourth, emotional adjustment (Janssens 1992). The focus remains on the expatriate adapting personal behaviour to that of the host culture.

Evidence of differences in national managerial values (Bass and Berger, 1979; Hofstede 1980, 1991; Laurent 1983) and attitudes (Haire, Ghiselli and Porter 1963; Redding and Casey 1976) has led on to research which tends to focus on this form of the adjustment process (Ruben and Kealey 1981; Hawes and Kealey 1981; Black and Porter 1991, Black, Mendenhall and Oddou 1991). Other recent authors have made similar points. For example "An internationally-assigned manager has to adjust and respond to these different sources of change ....newly assigned managers must find ways to adjust to the new cultural environment and this process may alter their values and beliefs" (Bird and Dunbar 1991). Much of the work on expatriate preparation and training (see Brewster and Pickard 1992 for a recent review) is built on the importance of this ability to understand and adjust; much of the work on stress in this context (Cooper 1988) makes the same point.

Torbiorn (1982) was one of the first to apply U curve adjustment theory (Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1963) to expatriates. This, in his formulation, predicts that expatriates arriving in the new country will have a short "honeymoon" period where the excitement of the new country is the predominant feature; a long "culture-shock" phase where disillusion with the new country settles in and pushes morale down; a third "adjustment" stage as the expatriate learns to operate appropriately in the new environment and a fourth stage, "mastery". De Leon and Selmer (1989), studying Swedish managers in the Pacific, adopt the following model of potential response strategies:

- **Replication** which refers to transitions that result in minimal adjustment to personal or role systems. The individual, in other words, tries to act as far as possible as he or she did before, whilst at the same time making an attempt to change the job role.
- **Absorption** which indicates a mode of transition where almost all the adjustment is made by the person and little is done to change the role. In such a case the expatriate tries to find out, usually from previous job incumbents and local subordinate managers, what kind of role has traditionally been performed by people in that job, and to fit themselves to that.
- **Determination** which means changing the job role but leaving the expatriate free to continue in previous modes of behaviour.
- **Exploration** which refers to cases where the expatriate changes and the job that they are filling also changes.

These U-curve theories have come under critical review (Black and Mendenhall 1990) and have also been found not to apply in recent European cases (Brewster 1991).

### **The problem of knowledge transfer**

The recent upsurge in literature concerned with adjustment and preparation comes as a direct response to what is seen as the traditional MNC view of expatriation. Lannier (1979) identified as typical the view that a good manager in one country will be a good manager in all countries. The point has been made repeatedly since then.

This assumption accounts for the fact that most studies of selection criteria for expatriates find that current competence is the main focus. There is substantial evidence in the literature that technical competence is seen as a crucial factor by MNCs (Ivancevich 1969; Hays 1971; Miller 1973; Howard 1974; Hayes 1974; Lannier 1979; Tung 1981, 1982; Zeira and Banai 1984, 1985), by the expatriates themselves (Gonzales and Neghandi 1967; Hayes 1971; Harris 1973; Hautaluoma and Kaman 1975; Bardo and Bardo 1980; Hawes and Kealy 1981; Zeira and Banai 1984, 1985) and by host-country nationals (Zeira and Banai 1985). It also helps to account for the low levels of preparation for expatriate assignment typically found in the research. Studies in the 1970s found that amongst US MNCs only two thirds provided any training at all (Baker and Ivancevich 1971; Lannier 1975) and less than 25% provided any formal orientation training (Baker and Ivancevich 1971; Lannier 1979). In the 1980s a study of the largest US MNCs found that "only 25 percent offer extensive predeparture orientation training programs" and "less than half the respondent firms top management believe language facility is important and only 20 per cent of their firms require language for the overseas assignment" (Baliga and Baker 1985 p.35). The expatriates themselves are significantly more enthusiastic about training programmes and languages. Other research however shows around 40% of American firms providing cultural orientation and two thirds providing language training (Tung 1982 p.66).

Evidence for European MNCs is rather more sparse. There is some evidence that the Europeans did more training in the 1970s and 1980s (Torbiorn 1983); more than half of Swedish companies provided formal training (Torbiorn 1983 p.52) as did about half of a general survey of European corporations (Tung 1982 p.66). Both these last two studies found the Europeans providing significantly more language training. There is more recent evidence that European MNCs remain more likely to do predeparture training (Brewster 1991).

There is a direct relationships between this approach to expatriation and the use of expatriation as a control mechanism (for evidence from European MNCs see Edström and Galbraith 1976, 1977; Torbiorn 1982; Brewster 1988; Björkman and Gertsen 1990). This has been well summarised by Martinew and Jarillo who see expatriation as one of the "more informal and subtle" mechanisms of coordination being used increasingly by MNCs (1991).

The process has also been described in terms which reflect an awareness of difference and local sensitivities. Thus, for example, authors write about the transfer of knowledge from the developed to the less developed world through the activities, largely, of the expatriate: "the Multinational Enterprise is the major institution through which both the technology and the entrepreneurial culture .....is transferred .....Systems thinking is highly developed in the headquarters of these firms [and although there are substantial cultural barriers, the task is] disseminating attitudes of this kind to indigenous managers". (Buckley and Casson, 1988, pp.24 and 27). Part of the expatriate's job is "to teach local nationals our way of doing things" (Boyaciller 1990).

## **The paradox of adjustment and knowledge transfer**

Research beyond the expatriate literature has argued that individuals can respond to new work roles either by changing their attitudes and their behaviour to match that which is expected from the new role, or by focussing on their strengths and attempting to change the environment and the expectations to match those (Dawes and Lofquist 1984; Nicholson and West 1988). This choice may be more theoretical than real. The paradox is that, for the expatriate at least, they have to do both in order to be effective: to learn new ways of doing things in the host culture - and to bring in to the host culture the ways of the home base in order to fulfil the requirements of control and knowledge transfer. In a rather similar way, Adler referred to the difference between seeing culture shock as a learning process (something to be undertaken enthusiastically) or as a psychological disease (something to be overcome) (Adler 1972).

This paradox is explored using British and Swedish expatriates in each others countries. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to set that data in context.

### **Britain and Sweden: previous evidence**

Fundamental to any analysis of Britons working in Sweden and Swedes working in Britain are the national characteristics and background of the two countries. These are sketched out below in an attempt to identify some of the similarities and contrasts of the two nations.

Both are northern European, advanced industrialised nations with highly developed service sectors. Both are protestant in their official religion and embody the protestant work ethic values. Both now have relatively few people working in the agricultural or extractive sectors, and both nations need to be export oriented given their relatively declining natural resources.

The two countries have highly developed forms of welfare state with state control of large sections of the economy. This remains the case despite the fact that the UK has experienced vigorous attempts to privatise industry and energy and cut back state expenditure in recent times.

The future prospects of the Swedish economy are a subject of intense discussion given the difficulties of remaining profitable in an increasingly competitive world. Cognisant of these world and European changes many Swedish MNCs Boards of Directors have taken measures to 'buy into' companies in the European Community and increase their commitments overseas. Some commentators have argued that these concerns have had an influence on Swedish management which has moved from being a more employee centred style to a more production (and profit) centred style in the last few years (Ekvall and Arvonen, 1989).

Britain and Sweden have fundamental differences. The most obvious are population and country size: Sweden has a population of 8½ million and is the third largest country in Western Europe in terms of land area. By contrast Britain has a

population of 56 million in a country nearly half that size. Thus the population densities are in stark contrast. Britain's problem is compounded by the fact that the largest proportion of the population live and work in London and the South East.

Both countries have highly developed educational systems but marked differences have often been mentioned, generally casting British education in a comparatively unfavourable light (Lawrence and Spybey, 1986).

### British and Swedish Managers: Similarities and Differences

In a world study of managerial styles emphasis was placed on the considerable differences between the oriental and occidental (Evans et al, 1989). In this context Britain and Sweden appeared very close. Hofstede is one of a few researchers who have attempted to analyse quantitatively the issues of cultural difference.

In this major study of cultural values Hofstede (1980) found Britain and Sweden to be similar on three of his four measures (Table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
**Britain and Sweden on Hofstede's Indices**

	PDI	UAI	INV	MAS
High	94	112	95	95
	(Philippines)	(Greece)	(USA)	(Japan)
Low	11	8	12	5
	(Austria)	(Singapore)	(Venezuela)	(Sweden)
Mean	31	64	51	51
Sweden	31	29	71	5
Britain	35	35	89	66
Difference	4	6	18	61

*Source: abstracted from Hofstede 1984*

Of the four indices it is only on Masculinity (MAS) that Britain and Sweden differ significantly. Masculinity is used by Hofstede to define the degree of preference for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material success. As Hofstede himself states "The masculinity/femininity dimension is the only one which sharply separates the Nordic from the Anglo countries; one of the most visible differences between Sweden and Great Britain is their way of handling industrial conflict issues, which in Sweden tends to be resolved by dialogue and in Britain by strikes." (Hofstede, 1984)..

Britain is more adversarial and Sweden more consensual. Recent research has compared British and Swedish labour markets in terms of what was termed negative and positive freedoms. By this the authors meant that over the past 50 years British employers and unions have sought to remain unfettered by law and independent from each other, whereas Swedish employers and unions have developed hierarchies to deal with each other which relies heavily on cooperation between their two powerful and centralised representative organisations (Douglas and Douglas, 1989).

Hofstede concludes his initial studies by placing the nationalities into four country clusters. Sweden and Britain occupy different groups. Britain is grouped with the

USA and British Commonwealth nations. Managers in this group are motivated by personal and individual success, in the form of wealth, recognition and 'self activation'. "The classic McClelland, Maslow, Herzberg pattern" The Swedes appear in the group which includes north European countries: the Netherlands, Finland, Denmark and Norway. In this quadrant managers tend to be motivated by success and belonging, success will be measured partly as collective in the quality of human relationships and the living environment (Hofstede, 1984).

Laurent also attempted to quantify cultural differences. As in the Hofstede findings the British and the Swedes did not differ dramatically although the British are more likely to see the organisation as a formal system (Table 2).

**TABLE 2**  
**Laurent Indices Averages**

	Political System	Authority System	Formal System	Hierarchical System
High	66 Italy	65 France	85 Germany/ Switzerland	66 Italy
Low	26 Denmark	30 United States	57 Sweden	25 Sweden
Mean	44	47	76	41
Sweden	42	46	57	25
Britain	32	48	80	36
Difference	10	2	23	11

*Source: (Abstracted from Laurent, 1983)*

### **Employee involvement: some comparisons**

In another study which analysed the degree of prescribed involvement of workers in decision making Britain was ranked eleventh of twelve countries as to the degree of direct involvement of workers and twelfth in terms of involvement of representative bodies. These countries were then divided into three strengths of management in terms of an involved style, i.e. the first group strong, the second group medium, and the third group weak. Sweden was in the first group and Britain in the third (IDE, 1981).

The uniqueness of the Swedish management style has frequently been noted.

"According to both Swedish managers themselves and others commenting on their modus operandi, decision making in Sweden is naturally participative, like a less exaggerated example of Japanese corporate decision making. It is therefore normal for a Swedish manager to consult



his subordinates, and not just to consult them cosmetically." (Lawrence and Spybey, 1986)\*

To the informed observer Sweden is a country with an employee centred management approach buttressed by the legal requirements of the co-determination system and over 80% unionisation. By contrast Britain has few legal obligations concerning workforce representation or consultation and over the past decade unionism has declined in influence and stands at approximately half the density of Sweden. Furthermore, recent evidence (Brewster and Holt Larsen 1992) indicates that within employing organisations trade union influence has increased in Sweden and decreased in Britain.

In studies involving British managers and workers a complicated picture of employee involvement emerges. Britain does not have legislative support for worker involvement - i.e. co-determination laws. However, it has been argued, using detailed British case studies, that "there is wide agreement that control in British business organisations is relatively dispersed and that subordinates are allowed to participate in decision making at all levels." (Lane, 1989)

The adversarial style which characterised much of British industrial relations, particularly in the 1970's and early 1980's, seems to belie this. For example research amongst German and British workers shows that British workers held their managers in less esteem than did German workers and in consequence the British workforce had much less trust in managers than the German workers had in theirs. (Miller 1979, Lilpert and Rayley 1983). This evidence seems to indicate that even at a more informal operational level within British organisations British managers practice only a superficial form of participation. "Sophisticated paternalism" has been suggested as a description of the British consultative managerial style. (Edwards, 1987)

The style of leadership is important in institutions where participative and consultative policies are practiced. Swedish companies operating in the USA found that American middle managers and workers expected the senior Swedish management to be more authoritarian and less participative. For example Ericsson, the Swedish telecommunications company, experienced considerable problems in this respect in a US subsidiary. The American workforce did not expect to be involved in the policy making or decision making process, or even expect to be consulted, and attempts by Swedish expatriate managers to do this led to discontent. The Americans expected the Swedish to "lead" i.e. take decisions. Attempts at employee involvement as practiced in Sweden were perceived as management shirking its responsibilities. (Edstrom & Margolies, 1986 Holmqvist, 1988).

One other factor frequently noted in commentaries on Swedish management is the slow decision making process in Swedish organisations. Lawrence and Spybey explain this as being a result of the co-determination system in general and Swedish egalitarianism: "in that egalitarianism tends to value everyone's commitment and consent equally." (Lawrence and Spybey, 1986).

### **British and Swedish expatriates**

The research data available on the process of expatriation is expanding fast, particularly in the United States. There is less data on European expatriates.

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\* The comparison with the Japanese style is a fascinating one. Many of the characteristics identified by e.g. Abramson, Lane and Nagai (1991) could be applied to the Swedish style.

Amongst the two most studied countries in this part of the world, however, are Sweden and Britain: and it is to an examination of this literature that we turn now.

We have already referred extensively to the work of Torbiörn (1982) which was based on studies of Swedish expatriates. Also valuable is more recent research by Björkman (1990) and Björkman and Gertsen (1990) which attempts to distinguish different expatriation practices in different Scandinavian countries. Hedlund (1984) and Hedlund and Åman (1984) were less concerned with the process of expatriation in general than with testing a "Swedish model" of managing subsidiaries and its likely effects. Their proposed model includes

- \* a mother-daughter structure for the formal organisation, with all subsidiaries reporting to the president of the parent company;
- \* a high degree of autonomy and status for the general managers of the foreign subsidiaries;
- \* an extended personal networks of close contacts between headquarters' top management and important foreign subsidiaries;
- \* informal, personalised control through information sharing and common experiences, rather than through hierarchy or impersonal, financial systems. Few explicit demands and performance criteria;
- \* the historically strong position of managers with a technical and/or manufacturing background.

Hedlund and Åman (1984) tested this "Swedish Model" on Swedish expatriates in sales subsidiaries in West Germany, France, Great Britain and USA. The companies studied were big MNCs and one of the purposes was to investigate how the subsidiaries reacted to the Swedish management style.

Some of the features Hedlund and Åman identify as typically Swedish are:

- \* Indecisiveness; Swedes prolong the decision-making and decisions taken might be difficult to interpret for the non-Swede.
- \* Consensus building; meaning that the Swede is a cautious decision-maker, who builds committees rather than makes unilateral decisions
- \* Systematic and detailed problems solving, where decisions may not necessarily come fast, but where problems are well penetrated when the decisions are taken
- \* Slow decision-making; because of the features mentioned above and because of the time it takes to get a clear answer from headquarters. And,
- \* Avoidance of open conflict, eg by avoiding embarrassing or difficult decisions

Hedlund and Åman argue that it is the Swedish management style which is unusual, not the style of the other countries, which means that the Swedish management style tends to be difficult for the non-Swede to understand. They conclude that the Swedish model of managing foreign subsidiaries seems to be changing in some ways; among other things towards more explicit goal-setting and quicker and more vigorous follow-up of results. The management style was also shifting towards a

blunter and somewhat rougher approach in at least two and perhaps three of the four companies studied. One of the possible reasons for these changes is the increasing use of non-Swedish managers, who cannot be expected to accommodate the culturally based aspects of the Swedish model, nor can they be expected to spend as much time in Sweden as would be required to function well in a very informal, implicit, organic structure.

The changing nature of internationalisation for Swedish companies is detailed by Forsgren (1989) who draws on some of his own previous research (Forsgren 1983, 1988; Larson 1985; Forsgren and Larson 1985) to point out that international expansion by Swedish companies is most often now by acquisition. He argues that increasingly the national management team is left in charge of the new acquisition (rather than be replaced by Swedes) and that the subsidiaries in many Swedish organisations are now increasingly autonomous from HQ. The organisation becomes a loosely connected political system with the subsidiaries controlling themselves to a large extent. Forsgren does not explicitly make the point but what is unusual and distinguishes the Swedish case is the combination of highly successful international companies with a very small home population and market. Hedlund (1990) expands this discussion into the expatriation area by arguing that Sweden is using fewer and fewer Swedish expatriates as organisations become more heterarchical and, indeed, that the logic may be that Swedish HQs will be moved outside Sweden - perhaps into the European Community.

Maler (1974) investigated the proportions of Swedish and local managers in four Swedish MNCs with a total of 136 subsidiaries in 36 countries. 71% of the subsidiaries are located in "developed" countries and 64% of the 36 countries belong to this category. Maler noted the nationality of all of the top managers, and his findings were that the proportion of local managers was greater in the "developed" countries: a finding replicated later by Hedlund (1990). In Maler's research the most common post for the Swedes was managing director, but only 48% of the managing directors were Swedes: 72% in the "less developed" countries and 40% in the "developed" countries.

The reasons for and against Swedish managers in the subsidiaries can - according to Maler (1974) - be categorised in four groups, namely:

- \* Needed expertise and competence
- \* Loyalty (local managers are held to be less loyal)
- \* Costs (local managers are less expensive)
- \* Image (it is important for a company to be "a good citizen in the host country")

The first two would tend to encourage the use of Swedish expatriates : the second two to discourage it. Maler discusses the existence of Swedish managers in Swedish subsidiaries and argues that the most common method of getting desired results from Swedish headquarters seems to be having an influential Swedish member on the board of the subsidiary. He also noted a tendency to expand the proportion of local managers.

There has been some research into the expatriates that Swedish companies do send abroad. We know, for example, that the reasons provided by these MNCs for using expatriates typically include transfer of know-how, transfer of management skills and contact with, and coordination of, the subsidiaries' operations (Björkman and

Gertsen 1990). Management development is rarely a motive (Borg 1987). Swedish expatriates usually have language training: half of the Swedish expatriates studied in the early '70s got such training, and 13-20% of the spouses received it as well (Torbiörn 1976). By the early 1990s 70% of the 40 companies studied by Björkman and Gertsen (1990) provided language training, and 62.5% of them provided such training for spouses. It is doubtful, though, whether language training would be provided for anyone expatriating to the UK: the assumption would be that they already spoke the language fluently.

Other evidence about Swedish expatriates is closer to the British data. Selection criteria for expatriates tend to have much in common with a heavy focus on technical expertise. Repatriation or early return through some kind of failure or problem is rare in both countries, certainly much lower than the available evidence from the United States would indicate for that country's expatriates (Björkman and Gertsen 1990, Brewster 1991).

Studies of British expatriates and British MNCs have, in a "typically British" way, been empirically strong but theoretically weaker. Thus, we know that, compared to Swedish MNCs, the British are more likely to use expatriates, less likely to take the spouse into account in the transfer, more likely to make the transfer very soon after the decision on overseas posting has been made and to keep them abroad for a shorter period (Brewster 1988, Brewster & Myers 1989). The British expatriates are more likely to have international experience, less likely to be female, and less likely to speak foreign languages.

Many British MNCs have had substantial experience of the process of managing expatriates and, in many companies, time spent in a foreign country, though not common, is seen by many Britons as a "normal" part of career progression. These are two of the factors which account for the greater use of expatriates by British multinationals compared to the Swedish ones. (Others would include the lower incidence of dual-career families in the UK, a greater willingness to work abroad and, critically, a still greater ethnocentric approach to the control of corporations).

Only a small proportion of British expatriates go to Sweden, so there was little detailed information, prior to the research reported here, about the particular problems and opportunities that they face.

### **The data**

Expatriation is still an unusual experience: only a minority of employees ever experience it. It involves a major upheaval for the expatriates and their families; and whilst it often proves to be a very positive experience for all concerned in the long run, the immediate transfer is frequently a very fraught time. We explored this process of expatriation with a sample of British managers in Sweden and Swedish managers in Britain concentrating on the specific problem of working in the new country - how difficult was it to manage in one country rather than the other? The distinction drawn by Black (1988) and Black and Stephens (1989) between adjustment to work, to interacting with host nationals, and to the environment is not altogether helpful, mainly because the categories are not discrete. In particular here, the first two categories clearly overlap for most expatriates. However, this general job-related area is the central focus of this paper. What additional problems did our expatriates come across in the office? This remains an under-researched area. Recent attempts in the literature to pull together what is known about expatriation address the issue mainly from the point of view of the MNC managing the expatriates (see e.g. Schuler and Dowling 1988). The focus in this research was the perspective of the expatriate.

The research was undertaken in 1989 and restricted to subsidiaries with more than five employees as below that number it would be difficult to identify interpersonal issues. The instrument was a survey questionnaire to expatriates from each country working in all identifiable organisations from each country which fulfilled the size criterion. Responses were received from 14 British organisations in Sweden (out of a total of 23), a return of 70%; and from 44 Swedish organisation in the UK (out of 110), a return of 41%. Detailed discussions and interviews were also conducted in six cases.\* Overall, though the numbers of returns are small they are drawn from a very specific, targeted population and represent 39% of the total of companies in Britain and Sweden with over 5 employees and employing, respectively, Swedish and British expatriate managers. This is a reasonably representative sample of all the relevant companies.

## **Findings**

The research enables a comparison between the literature on Swedish and British management styles and the reality experienced by our respondents. Whilst the evidence reinforces many of the points made in the literature, on one issue at least our evidence points in an entirely different direction. We find that amongst the expatriates researched here, some Swedish managers in the UK tend to behave more like the UK stereotype; British managers in Sweden more like the Swedish stereotypes. This stands in sharp contrast to the literature about expatriate adjustment. The rest of this paper explores this data and then proposes an explanation of this important finding.

### **Styles of management:**

The data confirms that in general both British and Swedish expatriates tended to share the stereotypes of British and Swedish working style and managerial practice (Brewster, Lundmark and Holden 1992). When we turned to what was actually important and happening in their current function, however, there were some fascinating and contrasting findings. Whereas the managerial views confirmed the stereotypes, there is some (admittedly limited) evidence from the research that actions may not do so.

Turning first to the expatriates' perceptions, managers from both countries believed their company's management style to be more consultative in Sweden and less consultative in the UK (Table 3). Thus of the British companies in the UK one is 'consultative with the workforce': three companies in Sweden gave that response. Of the Swedish companies in the UK five are 'consultative with the workforce' but in Sweden this nearly doubles to nine. The reverse pattern occurs at the other end of the value spectrum, where two of the British company in the UK 'prefer to keep decisions within the management team', whereas no British companies operating in Sweden follows this policy. Conversely there are no Swedish companies in Sweden who 'prefer to keep decisions within the management team'; but in the UK four Swedish companies adhere to this policy.

A pattern also emerges in which both groups always have a higher percentage in Sweden at the consultative end and a higher percentage in UK as one moved towards the least consultative end.

Practice, however, seems to be somewhat different from these stereotyped views. To take one simple example, an overwhelming number of managers from both British and Swedish organisations, claimed to have mission statements (Table 4): a finding backed by other research (Brewster and Bournois 1991). Interestingly,

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\* For more details of the research methodology see Brewster, Lundmark and Holden 1992.

however, the British companies in Sweden are more likely to communicate their mission statement to employees than are the Swedish companies in Britain. The British companies in Sweden concentrate upon communication through meetings and in writing. The Swedes in the UK use a combination of meetings and verbal communication.

TABLE 4 MISSION STATEMENT				
	Swedish Companies in the UK		British Companies in Sweden	
Organisations having company objectives/mission statement	35	80%	13	93%
Communicated to employees?	31	70%	12	86%
How is it communicated?				
At meetings	10	23%	11	79%
Written	9	20%	9	64%
Verbally	11	25%		
Videos	0	-	2	14%

A further question asked about issues of importance to the managers in their operations in the host country (Table 5). Here again there were some surprises. Inevitably, managers in both countries rated cost-consciousness as important. However the British managers in Sweden were more likely to rate "care and concern for the welfare of the workforce" most highly, and the British managers who were most likely to rate "cooperative decision-making" as very or rather important. By contrast it was the Swedish managers who were likely to attach most importance to "strong leadership".

Quotes from some of the managers indicate the views first-hand.

**MANAGER A (SWEDE IN UK):**

*Here there are more rules and regulations. In Sweden the work place situation is more democratic and people are more involved; in Britain its more hierarchical. The company has attempted to introduce a quasi-Swedish culture in the UK. The new Managing Director of the UK organisation has a management team, which operates in the same way as the Swedish group. We have an Executive Committee and they take decisions as a group. The Directors of each of the UK divisions meet and take collective decisions, and here in my division we try to operate in the same way. We meet and discuss and its a way of delegating responsibilities, and letting people feel that they have a more interesting job when they take on responsibility, and they can be part of the decision making. The British generally like this style. It takes some time to get used to it. In Malaysia we tried to introduce this style of working but it did not work. One of the Malaysian managers used to say that I was not tough enough with the workforce. They needed to know who was the boss. The idea that the oldest man is the wisest man is still strong in the East and women have a much different role.*

*Here we try to treat people as human beings. If we move into a new locality we ask the employees to choose the colours and decide on the decor. To form a committee and consult with everybody to, for example, choose the food and menus in the canteen, and organise the canteen arrangements. This makes people feel part of the organisation and proud of something they helped to create. It also costs so very little to do that. When people come to me with a problem I say to them 'go back and think of at least two solutions to these problems,' and then I choose which one of these is the best. This makes them think for themselves, and proud, and it's not just me taking a decision. That's a way of being lazy of course, if you want to think of it in that way.*

**MANAGER B (SWEDE IN UK):**

*What made a big impact on me here was the way people were inclined to accept the managing director's decision whereas in Sweden they wouldn't. If we take car policy as an example - everybody has a opinion about car policy and then we had a discussion and at the end of the discussion I said 'this is what we are going to do.' People said 'OK.' I couldn't believe that. That it was so easily accepted. Here people want the leader to take a decision and that is the end. The Swedes don't do that. If we don't agree we go away and think about the decision and keep coming back. If the decision was taken last week we couldn't care less. So in that sense it is easier here to be directive as a manager, because that's what people expect you to be. To my colleagues here they think the Swedes take ages and ages to make a decision. But we Swedes think you have to go through this discussion/ consultative stage before you come to a decision, and if you force that through too quickly it could be entirely wrong.*

**MANAGER C (BRIT IN SWEDEN):**

*It's very hard in Sweden to say who the boss is. Its a matrix organisation. When there are bosses they are very high up in the organisation. In your day-to-day work you don't have one. They will set you targets to complete: like you will have to get a product manual out by July. How you do it is up to you. No one will bother you. They treat you like adults. However, it can be disadvantageous. When I went to my first job as product manager I really made a mess of it, and it would have been much better had my boss given me advice. They make these plans but no one makes sure they are carried out. No one said 'how's it going?' or demands a quarterly report. My organisation is really a fluid matrix. Its very much horizontal information transfer. This may be the way of high tech companies: very informal operations. However, as the organisation has matured and the competition increased they have got much more professional in the way they operate. Much more cash cow oriented. The open/fluid way of working is more a style in high tech companies than purely Swedish. Its also part of a product cycle. You can see Apple and other high tech companies going through the same cycle. Its a transition from a fluid and very creative company to a cash cow organisation. There seems to be a cycle of growth from constructive chaos, rationalisation, long meetings and collapse.*

*It's very hard to pin down a decision, to say 'the bucks stops here.' One person to take responsibility and take decisions. In my company there are lots of layers of middle management. Too many chiefs and not enough indians.*

*The unions in Sweden have a lot of control over things like the working environment. There is very good industrial health in Sweden and there's a lot of control over pollution etc. The Safety Officer in Sweden is a man of power. He's a union man. Here I have a proper computer bench which is tilted forward so that I won't get back ache. In England you just get an ordinary bench. That would never be allowed in Sweden.*



**MANAGER D (BRIT IN SWEDEN):**

*In a meeting in Sweden it was always difficult to know who the decision maker was, and that tends to show that it's a decision by committee. It's more of a team approach, rather than having a leader and a group of followers. I talked to Swedes about that and they said that the biggest problem they had was in discussions with Germans, because they said that the Germans get frustrated. The Germans would say 'we come to these meetings and we talk a lot but we don't get any decisions.' The Germans like to see it all cut and dried. The Germans ask 'who is going to make the decision?' The Swedes replied that they had all made the decision. The Swedes have achieved a structure which aligns with that approach. They don't have a hierarchical structure in which status is perceived as important. For example, the style of dress in Sweden in business meetings is much more casual; a senior manager might turn up in jeans - this makes for a different environment and a different style. You could say that it's difficult to get a Swede to make a decision on their own. My general impression was that Swedes don't like pressure. They don't react well to pressure and they don't feel comfortable with stress. They are very concerned about stress and they say how stressful the job is etc. Quite often, therefore if you put somebody on the spot to make a decision, he'll tend not to make the decision and he'll bring the group in to make the decision, and he hides behind the group decision. So that's the negative side.*

*The other situation when you have meetings is the reserved approach. It can be uncomfortable for English people and maybe even more so for Italians and French. For example if we take an Englishman to a meeting who is not used to dealing with the Swedes we say that 'the golden rule is when you ask a question, you wait for an answer.' That's the most difficult thing in the world to do. I've often had to kick English managers under the table for not waiting. If you have a question and there is a long silence, the Swede is contemplating an appropriate response. But the Englishman can't bear silence, especially if there are 15 or 20 people present. The Swede will only give a reply if they have something to say. They think about it first. 15 seconds of silence is a long time and the natural tendency of an English person would be to answer the question for him, or conversely he would ask a second question. If he goes the second route it makes it even more difficult because now the Swedes have got two questions to think about!. I've talked to Swedes about this and asked them if they don't feel uncomfortable about this and they've not even realised that there is a silence in the room. The English person is very conscious of it and the Swede doesn't know that it has even happened. The danger is that people who don't understand them think they are stupid or are not quick on their feet and that's a very dangerous assumption because that's not the case at all. Their body language and their way of working is different. That's what I found difficult in meetings. Sometimes I came out of meetings and asked how we did because you don't get that feedback. In England for example you say this is our quotation and to get a response to find out their views and you might add 'and we think it's very competitive.' The English guy would say that it's not as good as you think it is, and if he doesn't say anything, you know that he agrees with you but doesn't want to say. In Sweden you can try the same approach and the guy will just sit there anyway and you don't know whether he agrees or disagrees.*

**Explaining the paradox**

Previous commentaries and research on Swedish and British styles of management would lead researchers to predict certain outcomes to investigations such as this. Swedish managers would be expected to allow more participation of the workforce in decision making than British managers: the Swedish style of management was perceived as being more relaxed and 'soft'. Conversely it would be expected that

British management would be stronger on leadership values with a tendency towards an autocratic style and to placing greater emphasis on cost consciousness. The findings here are that the expatriate managers in Britain and Sweden share these beliefs. From both perspectives they see the British as more autocratic and the Swedes as more consultative.

However, the evidence also points in the contrary direction. When asked specifically about their working environment and practices, the Swedes in the UK are less likely to communicate their mission statements to their workforce; less likely to be at the consultative end of the spectrum of management styles; no less cost conscious; but less concerned with the welfare of their workforce and more likely to believe in strong leadership.

How can this paradox be explained? Arguably the explanation is clear - and unremarkable, except in so far as it has not been noted before. Expatriate managers (at least in these two countries) adapt to their host countries' cultural working environment much more than has previously been understood. The data indicates a necessary willingness of expatriate managers to adapt to their new working cultures. This willingness may be borne out of necessity: British expatriate managers in Sweden are faced with legislative compulsion to at least consult the workforce, whilst no such legislation exists in the UK. However, as a single dimensional explanation this is inadequate as it cannot explain the range of styles in each country.

Similarly, explanations advanced by the expatriates in terms of the local response may be too limited. What is clear is that in the wider context of national cultures - which would include legislation as well as employee reaction along with the responses of other managers, local views of "felt-fairness" and "appropriateness" and managerial styles - many expatriate managers are able to adopt a style of behaviour which is, literally, "foreign" to them.

Thus a British manager working with Swedish managers in a wellknown manufacturing company in the UK confirmed that in his experience Swedish managers often relished the freedom from a participative management style which was afforded them in their subsidiary companies in Britain. *"Some become authoritarian in their style overnight and they seem perfectly comfortable with the adjustment."* One Swedish manager found relief in escaping from the restraints of his country and stated that he was *"glad to change my management style. In Sweden subordinates are used to openly questioning the manager's proposals. Here (in the UK) the boss is right!"* Similarly a Swedish manager in one of the case studies said that his English secretary has frequently told him that he must be tougher with the workforce in his UK subsidiary, or they will view him as weak. This would endorse the view of Hofstede who states "managers in all settings probably learn to behave as autocratically as their subordinates allow them." (Hofstede, 1984).

Some of the Swedish managers in the UK have gone a long way towards proving this view - but some have not: they have remained with the "Swedish" style. Similarly, some of the British managers in Sweden have adhered to a more typically directive mode whilst others have adopted the consultative style enthusiastically. Without more evidence of what subordinates will allow it is impossible to be conclusive, but it may be that Hofstede allows too little scope for managerial choice and expatriate adaptability.

British managers tend to become more consultative when they move to Sweden, and Swedish managers less consultative when they move to the UK. It would seem that the indigenous working culture of the host country affects the management style of the expatriates. Expatriate managers adapt their style to the prevailing culture in which they work.

### A note on generalisability

This study has focused on expatriate managers operating in two matched European countries with considerable similarity in national culture. This makes it unusual and raises questions about the applicability of the findings elsewhere. The usual assumption by MNCs, and expatriates, and in the literature (Church 1982; Mendenhall and Oddon 1985) is that the greater the cultural distance, the more difficulty there will be for the expatriate making the adjustment to the host culture. The main reason behind this is that the expatriate will simply not know, or even be able to identify, appropriate behaviours. This view has been challenged empirically: one study showed that the US has most failures in joint ventures with Canada and Ireland (Franko 1971). More relevantly here studies of United States/Swedish interactions have shown that transfers between similar developed cultures can cause problems (Edstrom and Margolies 1986; Holmquist 1988; Davison 1989).

The problem is two-fold. First, people moving to similar cultures find it difficult to maintain the consciousness of difference. They see much that is familiar - assume from that fact that much, or nearly everything, is the same - and act accordingly. Second, and as a result of the first, when the resultant actions fail to generate the expected outcomes the expatriates, and the locals, assume individual error rather than culturally based problems. Research amongst other European expatriates found no simple correlation between the location of the foreign assignment and ease of adjustment. Working in other European countries was not necessarily easier. (Janssen 1992).

One Swedish manager in the research detailed below expressed this as follows:  
*I have been asked about my first impressions many times. I was talking to one of my colleagues in Sweden the other day and he asked me how it was going. I said that everything was fine. He said that he remembered me saying after I had been in UK for a month that going to the Middle East, to Arabian countries, was less of a culture shock than coming to the UK. That was my first reaction. When you travel to another country where things are very different in terms of people, language and customs you expect things to be different. When you come to the UK where you speak English fluently, you feel that there shouldn't be a difference. This proves to be something of a shock. We are not prepared for the differences.*

Research which has focused on developed country - LDC transfers has found that there are significant cultural problems; and that expatriates are often unable to adapt their behaviour to the local environment. Black and Porter, for example, found that "American managers in Hong Kong exhibited similar managerial behaviours to their counterparts in the US" (1991 p. 104). More directly related to this study, other work has found that the CEOs in Swedish companies operating in Eastern cultures had little knowledge of the work-related values of their subordinates (Salmer and de Leon 1989). This is unlikely to be such a problem for the culturally-closer transfers considered in this paper. Clearly, in these cases, expatriates have considerable choice as to whether to adapt to local behavioural styles or to import home behaviours.

This finding may be, to some degree, related to the considerable autonomy given to the expatriates by the firms in this Anglo-Swedish sample. It has been argued that the widely acknowledged greater autonomy of expatriate postings is an important issue in satisfaction with the job (Nicholson and West 1988). It is unclear whether the degree of freedom given by the MNCs in this study is matched elsewhere. Amongst US MNCs, for instance, who provide more of the world's expatriates than most, one study argues that American companies give their subsidiaries less autonomy than those of Sweden and the UK (and Germany and Japan) (Otterbeck

1981); another that US firms provide more autonomy than European ones (Engelhoff 1982).

Transfers between "similar" countries are likely to grow as economic trading blocs such as the European Community become more important. Without further evidence it is difficult to know whether expatriate managers do have a choice between whether to adjust to local ways of behaving; or attempt to import new ways. It seems likely that, like all paradoxes, this is a dichotomy which is more apparent than real. In practice most expatriates will do some of both. The evidence presented here is that there may in some instances be a greater degree of choice in that decision than has been recognised hitherto.

**C J Brewster**  
**August 1992**

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