

## **Global managers: qualities for effective competition**

Abbas J. Ali and Robert C. Camp

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### Abstract:

Recent global trends dictate that today's global managers need skills and attributes to be effective in a changing business environment. Based on the findings of a study conducted among 184 international managers, qualities pertaining to adaptability, flexibility and comfortableness in dealing with people from other cultures are necessary in the proper conduct of business affairs. The study also identified the 'essential qualities' that are required by every manager, and the 'supplementary qualities' that are additionally needed for international assignment.

### Full Text:

The mobility of individuals and firms has accentuated the importance of the availability of skills and attributes for managing in a changing global environment. Given the importance of international business growth and world economic integration, the need for managers with necessary qualities (e.g. attentiveness, flexibility, receptiveness, alertness, etc.) in almost every domestic industry is becoming a prerequisite for corporate survival and for maintaining a competitive edge throughout the world (Ali and Masters, 1988; Peters, 1985). In addition, today's firm is viewed as an idea chamber, an experimental space within which knowledge workers engage in the creative task (Webber, 1994). The manager's task is to manage the chamber, not the knowledge worker inside it. In fact, the internationalization of business has imposed a challenge not only for managers of transnational corporations (TCs) but also for managers of firms operating in any national market. Managers are faced simultaneously with appropriate human resource policies (due to workforce diversity) and suitable manufacturing and marketing policies in other contexts. Companies which adequately deal with cultural, human resource, technological and manufacturing policies are destined to be the firms of the future. The concomitant disappearance of trade barriers and the accelerated transfer of knowledge and capital across borders has reduced the role of the nation-state. As a consequence, the distinction between domestic and international corporations has virtually been eliminated.

Competition today centres on attracting qualified, knowledge employees. In fact, competition, according to Lawrence Bossidy (1995), chairman of Allied Signal, is tough, and it takes brains to win. He argues that, in today's competitive business environment, nothing is more important than hiring and developing people. Given this reality, neither management research nor practice are adequately meeting the challenge of the globalization of business. For example, Adler and Bartholomew (1992), in their survey of 50 North American firms, find that all firms take a global approach to overall business strategy, financial systems, production operations, and marketing but lack globally competent managers. The authors found that human resource systems were the least globally developed functional area within the surveyed firms. Similarly, Black and Porter (1991) suggest that US based firms do not include in their selection criteria such individual qualities as cognitive flexibility, cultural flexibility, degree of ethnocentricity, etc. As a consequence, they are neglecting cultural adaptability and sensitivity in their international assignments.

In the context of management research, Barnett and Toyne (1991) accentuate the need to re-evaluate the fundamental assumptions underpinning international human resource management research. Likewise, Lolla and Davis (1991) assert that existing assumptions and perceptions regarding the global environment remain elementary at best. Again, the authors

suggest that there is an urgent need to facilitate cultural socialization and adaptation.

Despite this bleak situation, several studies have attempted, empirically and conceptually, to examine the managerial qualities necessary for effective performance at home and abroad. The present study is the first to empirically identify skills and qualities needed for "global managers." In addition, this study attempts to highlight illusions that currently impede an otherwise normal process of global management thinking and practice.

## Review of the literature

Because the globalization process has intensified, the quest for understanding managers and organizations across nations has become increasingly urgent. Over the last three decades a rich literature dealing with global competition and international human resource management has accumulated. Within the context of managerial qualities and skills applicable to the global marketplace, two major classifications of studies have evolved: the international assignment and global competences.

### International assignment

The major concern of this particular category of studies is foreign assignment in general. This includes expatriates, third-country nationals, and local nationals. Most of the studies in this category focus on ways to enhance the performance of these personnel, thereby improving the competitive position of the parent organization in the global marketplace. In addition, most research in this category is well established; especially in the area of expatriates. Expatriates' selection, training, adaptation rewarding and repatriation have been investigated extensively. The basic assumption that is often asserted by scholars is that multinational corporations (MNCs) have strategic objectives that span the globe, and global assignment plays a significant role in implementing these objectives. Thus, MNCs must develop people who can successfully design and implement strategies, utilize resources, ideas, technologies, and effectively process and integrate information in a global context (Black et al., 1992).

Several researchers have examined a wide range of characteristics needed in international operations. Managerial competence and experience, cultural empathy, ability to face ambiguous situations, communication skills, and the ability to view the world from different points of view are considered the most likely factors to determine success or failure in a foreign environment (Ali and Masters, 1988; Doz and Prahalad, 1986; Marquardt and Engel, 1993; Phatak, 1992).

With regard to the factors critical to expatriate success, Zeira and Banai (1985) find that the most desired criteria in selecting expatriate executives are proficiency in the host country's language, expertise, seniority, and previous success in overseas assignment. The authors indicate that there was substantial consensus on the desired criteria among headquarter officials of MNCs, their subsidiaries top executives, and host country officials. Ali and Masters (1988) find that the most mentioned qualities for international assignments are managerial competence and past experience, technical competence, ability to make decisions in an atmosphere of risk and uncertainty, understanding the long-term strategy of the firms, ability to view the world from different points of view, and cross-cultural awareness. In the USA, nevertheless, most decision makers use domestic performance to predict success in an overseas assignment. Black and Porter (1991) indicate that US-based firms select typical American managers for overseas assignments and tend to believe that expatriate managers should manage in overseas assignments just as they did back in the USA. Worse, Marquardt and Engel (1993) argue that, until recently, US-based MNCs have often treated expatriate assignments as a sort of necessary nuisance and have sometimes selected personnel for them without regard to their performance. Indeed, most US MNCs send American managers for overseas assignments without any preparation or training (Black, 1988; Tang, 1981). Current

thinking and reality, however, indicate that such indifferent attitudes, on the part of top executives, to global assignment is costly in time and money, and is detrimental to company survival and future growth.

### Global competences for success

Studies under this category are concerned with attributes and skills necessary for effective performance at home and abroad. The major assumptions underlying these studies are: that managers should not only manage but also lead; and that success comes to the alert and agile, and those who never resign after graduation (Ali, 1993; Kotter, 1995).

Adler and Bartholomew (1992) compare the qualities of transnationally competent managers with those of traditional international managers. They specify the qualities for managing globally competent people as follows:

- \* understanding the worldwide business environment from a global perspective;
- \* learning about many cultures;
- \* working with and learning from people from various cultures simultaneously;
- \* creating a culturally synergistic organizational environment;
- \* adapting to living in many foreign cultures;
- \* using cross-cultural international skills on a daily basis;
- \* treating foreign colleagues as equals; and
- \* willingness to transpatriate for career and organization development.

The authors trace the progression of organizations: domestic, international, multinational. They believe that new global competences are needed for working in or managing transnational corporations (TCs). By limiting these qualities to TCs, Adler and Bartholomew ignore the fact that even managers in purely domestic organizations need these skills. Today's competition is far reaching in its scope and effect. Domestic firms cannot escape it and are unable to go around it. To survive, these firms must nurture global competencies.

Bartlett and Ghoshal (1992) view global managers as a network of specialists, not a single individual found in TCs. They believe that in TCs there are three groups of managers who are highly specialized yet closely linked global managers. The qualities for success in each group are different but complement the qualities of other groups. The three groups are: the business manager, the country manager, and the functional manager, along with the main group, the corporate manager. The identified attributes of the business manager are: strategist, architect, and co-ordinator. Attributes of the country manager are: sensor, builder, and contributor. The functional manager is assumed to display the qualities of scanner, cross-pollinator, and champion. The corporate manager assumes the qualities of: leader; talent scout, and developer. The specification of qualities under each category is useful in the sense that it highlights the most needed skills and focuses the top executive's attention on these qualities in addressing issues related to motivation, promotion and global career design and development. In addition, it centres attention on what is needed to be done in each category and clarifies role and expectations. Unfortunately, Bartlett and Ghoshal concentrated only on managing TCs, with their global operations and the complexity of their products and service. Organizations which are not global in their operations still need managers with a global perspective and orientation. These organizations are no longer operating in an isolated environment. In a globally integrated economy, these organizations play a significant role in the chain of activities.

Wills and Barham (1994) provide a set of desired behaviour competences for the "international manager". They group competences into three categories:

- (1) cognitive complexity (cultural empathy, active listening, sense of humility);
- (2) emotional energy (emotional self-awareness, emotional resilience, risk acceptance); and
- (3) psychological maturity (curiosity to learn, orientation to time, personal morality).

The authors accentuate two important aspects that are often neglected in a discourse of competences: respecting the equality of human rights and the dignity of individuals; and making sense of life as a complete whole (balancing the demands of work, home and social life). The authors, however, consider these qualities relevant only to international managers (individuals who are managing across a number of countries/cultures simultaneously).

It is clear from the foregoing that current research and thinking focus attention either on "qualities needed for international managers" and/or compartmentalize these qualities along managerial positions in a global organization. There is a need, however, to concentrate on necessary qualities (basic requirements) that each manager should acquire/nurture. Furthermore, it seems that the problem of the preceding studies stems from that fact that most researchers and practitioners still subscribe to the notion, "Think globally and act locally," instead of, "Think globally and act globally". Different forces are in the making that render such perspective obsolete. These forces include global electronic information and the speed of receiving, processing and storing information. Global relationships have become essential elements for growth among firms. In fact, local firms have been linked to global webs (Kanter, 1994). There is free movement of skilled people from developing nations to the industrial world and vice versa (skilled human resources used to migrate from emerging and developing nations to the industrial world). Interaction among people from different nationalities has become common. Competition among firms and nations centres around ideas. Human resources, therefore, assume significant roles in enhancing competitiveness over availability of raw materials and capital. Developing and emerging economies are beginning to assume leadership roles as drivers of global growth. Economic competition is no longer merely among sovereign nations but more and more is becoming among regions within nations or among regional blocs. The traditional role of nation-state is in decline, while the role of TCs is gaining more influence in world affairs; and the world is becoming a knowledge-based society where individual knowledge takes primacy. In this new society, the march to the future is collective and all work emerges through relationships (Webber, 1994). In addition, in the new world economy integration becomes the norm rather than the exception thereby universal qualities and attributes (e.g. integrity, sensitivity, cultural empathy, flexibility) are becoming prerequisites for competent managers in the home country or abroad. The present study, therefore, advocates that today's manager must be global in his/her orientations and spirit. This does not mean that global managers have to know in detail the historical and cultural aspects of other nations. Rather, it means that global managers must have a basic understanding of global events and/or be attentive to the concerns and beliefs of people from other cultures. Ethnocentrism, arrogance, cultural prejudice, and prejudgement hinder managers' progress on local, national or international levels.

In advocating that today's manager must be global in his/her orientations, there is a need to examine qualities that managers must display for effective business dealings. Certainly, these qualities have been identified in the international human resource management and international management literature. Previous research, however, lacks comprehensiveness and often concentrates on either international assignment or competences for success in TCs. The fact that competition today centres on attracting knowledge employees requires that qualities needed for "global managers" be identified empirically. This is an important step for clarifying and reinforcing qualities that have been addressed in the literature and among

scholarly writers. In addition, the empirical identification of these qualities will help to confront particular illusions that prevail in the literature. Illusions are found in every field of study. In the international human resource area, however, they persist due to the rapid change in management conduct and practice in the global marketplace. It is important to recognize these illusions in the context of both the available literature and the present survey. This review should sensitize scholars to the need for a fresh look at these illusions and to the consequences of inappropriate attributions and expectations.

## Method

### Data collection

The sample consisted of 185 firms. The questionnaire was mailed to the presidents or CEOs of Pennsylvania firms engaged in international operations. The sample was selected randomly from The Pennsylvania Industrial Directory (1992). About 900 firms involved in international operations in south-east and western Pennsylvania were contacted. These firms are located in counties that have reported having 500 or more manufacturing establishments. A total of 194 questionnaires were received (185 were usable), yielding a response rate of 22 per cent. This response rate is fairly acceptable given the nature of the population of this study (i.e. the majority of them are small-medium firms that are normally not accustomed to research). In addition, the characteristics and the background of the respondents are similar to the that of total population.

In terms of sales volume, the majority (51 per cent) of participant firms have a sales volume of \$5 to \$50 million and about 24 per cent have total sales of more than \$50 million (Table I). Of the firms, 46 per cent have 100 employees or fewer and about 36 per cent employ more than 200 individuals. Most of the firms (65 percent) have been engaged in international business for more than ten years. About 93 per cent of them are in manufacturing and the rest are in the service sector. About 51 per cent of the firms characterized their position in the industry as average, 24 per cent as above average and only 4 per cent as excellent. Many of them (45 per cent) perceive their industry outlook to be good, 18 per cent as very good, and 4 per cent as excellent. In terms of growth potential in the 1990s and beyond, 36 per cent believe that the growth will be in the US domestic market and 33 per cent believe it will be in the global marketplace. Most of the participant firms believe that the biggest challenge for them is either to compete proactively on a global basis (42 per cent) or to compete proactively in the US domestic market (41 per cent).

Table I. Profile of the surveyed firms

	Number	Percentage
Size of firm (sales volume)		
Less than \$5 million	46	26
\$5-\$50 million	42	50
More than \$50 million	45	24
	183	100
Number of employees		
100 employees or less	85	46
101-200 employees	33	18
Over 200 employees	66	36
	184	100

Number of years your company has been involved in international business

Not involved	18	9
Up to 4 years	14	8
5-10 years	33	18
Over 10 years	120	65

185 100

Type of industry

Service	12	7
Manufacturing	172	93

184 100

Competitive posture

Compete proactively globally	77	43
Compete proactively in the USA	75	42
Respond defensively globally	17	9
Respond defensively in the USA	11	6

180 100

### Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study is part of the International Competitiveness Survey (ICS). Ali (1991) developed the ICS. In this study, basic profiles (e.g. size of firm, international business experience, managerial level, firm's competitive position) skills and qualities needed for global managers are utilized. The second part consists of 13 statements. Participants were asked to indicate how often each attribute (statement) is needed. The participants rated each statement on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "never" and 5 "always". The scale Cronbach's alpha reliability is 0.91.

### Results

The results of the rank analysis appear in Table II. According to this ranking, executives believe that comfortability in dealing with people from different cultures, maintenance of a flexible attitude, adaptability and commitment for change, possession of a global perspective, and knowledge of the social, [TABULAR DATA FOR TABLE II OMITTED] economic, and political environment of other nations are the most needed qualities. Participants believe that conversational proficiency in two or more languages, willingness to work and live in a foreign culture, and the ability to establish and maintain personal relations with influential individuals in foreign countries are less important (see Table II).

Table III presents the results of a varimax-related factor analysis for the skills and qualities statements. Two factors with values greater than one were extracted, explaining 60.8 per cent of variance. A cut-off loading of 0.45 or above was selected. The two factors can be labelled as "essential qualities" (qualities needed for any manager) and global assignment qualities (for those that work in other cultures).

Table IV presents the relationships between selected demographic and organizational variables. The results indicate that these variables do not have significant influence on

executives' perceptions of the qualities needed in the global environment. That is, participants appear to have similar perceptions of these qualities regardless of their organizational or personal background.

Table III. Rotated factor matrix for the 13 items of the construct of qualities for global managers

Item	Factor 1: Essential qualities	Factor 2: Supplementary qualities
1. Global perspective	0.76	0.14
2. Human resources	0.72	0.15
3. Flexible	0.85	0.19
4. Technical literacy	0.63	0.19
5. Comfortability	0.77	0.28
6. Knowledge	0.66	0.45
7. Problem solving	0.74	0.22
8. Change	0.83	0.19
9. Foreign assignment	0.18	0.76
10. Long term	0.60	0.44
11. Experience	0.56	0.38
12 Language	0.14	0.75
13 Personal relations	0.25	0.75
Eigen value	6.63	1.27
Pact of variance	51.00	9.80

Table IV. Correlations between qualities for global manager scale and selected variables

Variables	R(*)
Size (sales)	0.12
Size (employees)	0.14
Firm's international business experience	-0.01
Type of industry	-0.01
Management level	0.05
Firm's competitive position	0.13
Industry outlook	0.04
Growth potential	0.13

\* No significant correlation

## Discussion

In this study it was assumed that, in today's global economy, the separation of managers into two mutually exclusive groups - domestic and international - is inappropriate. The results indicate that many of Pennsylvania's top executives appear to agree with this assumption. In particular, participants believe that there are general qualities needed by managers working in either the home market or abroad (e.g. comfortability in dealing with people from different cultures, possession of a global perspective). Additional or supplementary qualities that may not be needed in the home market are considered essential for global assignments. These qualities have never been identified in previous research as a separate category. Existing literature often lumps together qualities needed for global competences. There was almost unanimous agreement on these attributes among participants regardless of their personal or

organizational background.

This general agreement accentuates the proposition that researchers should not limit qualities of adaptability, flexibility, receptivity, and cultural empathy to expatriates only. There are, as the results indicate, common qualities which have universal applicability and are needed for conducting business in today's global economy. Cultural empathy, integrity, and comfortability in dealing with people from various cultures, along with effective performance, highlight the necessity to think and act in relevant cultural terms. This does not mean that today's managers must know in detail the cultural and historical backgrounds of other nations. Rather, it means that global managers need to think and act with an open mind and in socially responsive ways to events at home and abroad. A general knowledge of another nation's culture and history is essential but general cultural knowledge, if coupled with prejudice and prejudgement, is an obstacle to effective global management. Global managers do not integrate foreign thought in their mental programming. Rather, they seek to process, integrate and co-ordinate thoughts to generate synergy and a responsive system that enhances global understanding and interaction. Today's global managers view the prevailing notion in management literature to "think globally and act locally" as inadequate for dealing in a dynamic but highly integrated global economy. For these managers, major actions take place on the global stage and the domestic market is not a separate stage but an integral element of an integrated global system.

In addition, there is a need to move from placing more emphasis on the "successful" qualities for international managers to highlighting the qualities of competent managers. Traditionally, firms have sent managers for global assignments who had a proven domestic record. They stressed technical expertise. While such a practice was inadequate before, in today's market it is a recipe for disaster. In asserting the qualities needed for success, researchers and practitioners alike were concerned with coping with difficulties in foreign markets. Success was often measured in dollars and ignored the qualitative aspects of relationships with people. Difficulties, however, due to the dynamics of a world economy, may be found in both home and host markets. Similarly, concerns about efficiency and quantification of everything in terms of dollars can ignore real failure. Thus, there is a need for competent managers. These managers are not only able to deal effectively in the global marketplace (at home and abroad) but are also capable of realizing considerable advantage in their personal and organizational life. For some, this might appear to be mere speculation. We believe, however, that this is a reality. A simple look at the world around us and, in particular, at the nature of today's global business confirms our position. For example, competitive advantage is enhanced through co-operation and alliance with companies traditionally considered as rivals. Furthermore, the scope and the depth of relationships among companies are not restricted to an individual industry. Rather, relations may be numerous and cross industry boundaries. Likewise, today's work is as much about spirit as about dollars. It is about expressing authenticity and creating meaning (Webber, 1994). Concerns for human equality and dignity are no longer the monopoly of the charitable and humanistic organizations. In addition, the quest for realizing a world-class operation, enhancing the quality of life in the workplace, and the desire to be involved energetically in international affairs, induce managers to pursue truth and meaningful relationships in their business conduct instead of being motivated by winning at any expense. Truly, managers' actions are scrutinized closely by a complex set of stakeholders. Furthermore, managers' activities have domestic as well as international consequences. The authors believe that the distinction between the "domestic" and "international" manager is rendered obsolete in today's economy.

## Illusions

This study makes it clear that nurturing global management qualities is fundamental to a firm's growth and global economic integration. Nevertheless, it appears that many scholars and practitioners are still victims of an outmoded thought process. A review of the literature



suggests that they still subscribe to the notion either that expatriate managers' skills are completely different from those of domestic managers (e.g., Lobel, 1990) or that traditional domestic skills, abilities and managerial behaviours are appropriate for managing in foreign cultures (e.g. most US-based firms subscribe to this notion). Furthermore, as Adler and Bartholomew (1992) argued, North American firms human resource systems are not nearly as global as their business operations.

Since globalization processes and events appear, on many occasions, to move faster than idea development, the essential qualities for any global manager (working in either a national or international environment) are often ignored or misunderstood. In addition, there seems to be a particular mind set among scholars and practitioners alike that is either attached to the old dichotomy (domestic versus expatriate qualities) or that suffers from illusions that have been nurtured over the years. These illusions are identified below:

\* Using cross-cultural training is enough for enhancing a global manager's skills and qualities. No. Involvement in cross-cultural training or workshop programmes is fine. However, it is not enough to produce a competent global manager. Most training programmes are not effective. Trainers often lack adequate skill and/or perspective. In addition, the trainee must be willing to learn and act on new knowledge. Learning and adopting global qualities involve a continuous process.

\* US managers treat people from other countries with respect. This indicates that they have already acquired global qualities. No. Treating people with respect regardless of their cultural or national backgrounds is certainly essential. However, the necessary qualities are broader than simply respect. Competent global managers must display more than mere respect. A wide range of qualities must be nurtured and developed to ensure competence and effectiveness.

\* Managers who are working with "domestic" firms do not need global qualities. No. To be a global manager you do not have to operate overseas or be associated with TCS. Today's managers interact with people from all over the world, and effective behaviour and conduct is not limited to overseas operations. In addition, global competition is no longer confined to TCS; even small "domestic" firms are influenced by it.

\* Success in the home market is an indication that managers have global qualities. No. Success in the home market can be the result of technological literacy or the result of other forces. Managing in a dynamic global environment should not be left to chance or be based on unrealistic assumptions. In addition, exposure to various events and experiences enhance the possibility of success in other settings.

\* Working in and/or visiting other nations is adequate for developing global qualities. No. International experience and exposure are necessary but not sufficient qualities. There are many who have worked in other countries but who did not understand these cultures or speak the native language. Exposure to different cultures may increase awareness of existing cultural similarities and differences but may not adequately sensitize people to such differences.

\* Only top managers, especially those who reside in the headquarters of the firm, are obliged to develop and display global qualities. No. Managers at all levels in an organization should have global qualities. In today's global business environment, organizations have to be flexible and agile. Likewise, success for any firm requires collective judgement and action. Spreading global qualities throughout an organization helps ensure effective performance both at home and abroad.

\* Global qualities and needs can be provided by international consultants and/or translators. No. Neither international consultants nor translators can teach global qualities in a matter of days on site. Global qualities are internal attributes that must be espoused by an individual and are developed over a longer period. They require a commitment and a willingness to learn.

\* Global qualities are necessary for politicians and those who are involved in international affairs. No. Politicians are constrained by local politics and the demands of their various constituencies. Global managers' constituencies are the customers who buy and utilize their products or services. In addition, global managers, because of their work, orientations, and experience may be more qualified than politicians to play a significant role in narrowing the misunderstandings among nations.

\* The "formal" college education received by most managers has prepared them to understand and adapt to cross-cultural demands and operations. No. Formal education does not necessarily enhance or cultivate global qualities. Many managers acquire technical skill and knowledge, but do not benefit adequately from a liberal cross-cultural education which may sustain youthful biases and prejudice.

In summary, this study advocates that today's managers must cultivate global qualities to deal effectively in a dynamic world environment. In addition, the results of the study indicate that there are essential global qualities that should be nurtured in every manager. In assuming a global assignment, supplementary qualities are needed. While the results have several implications and highlight several issues that are important for realizing effective performance, the study relied on a sample from only one state in the USA. A cross-sector, cross-state sample, and preferably a cross-national study, is essential to generalize the results of this study. In addition, future research should focus on actual cases of global managers. This, coupled with interviews and observations, may help in recognizing additional sets of qualities. Likewise, the current construct should be refined to include a wide range of qualities that are either essential or supplementary. A multi-round Delphi process is necessary to generate the widest possible range of ideas and opinions, that can then be refined by using a factor analysis technique.

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