The Analysis of Factors Causing Stress and Burnout in Expatriates: Case Study at PT. XYZ

Anindea Pudjie Hapsari[1*], Didin Hikmah Perkasa[2]

[1,2]Universitas Paramadina
Email: anindea.hapsari@students.paramadina.ac.id

Abstract

Nowadays, many manufacturing companies have started sending their employees abroad as expatriates to manage international operations, expand markets, and integrate their global operations. Working in a foreign country often poses challenges that can lead to stress and burnout. Stress and burnout can have a negative impact on work performance, so it is important for companies to understand and manage the factors that cause them. This study aims to determine the factors that cause stress and burnout in expatriates at PT XYZ. This research is a qualitative research. The data collection methods used are interviews, documentation and thematic analysis, using 11 expatriate informants who work at PT XYZ. The results showed that high workload, lack of job control, social isolation, environmental uncertainty, and language difficulties were the main factors affecting stress and burnout levels, but they and the management of PT XYZ tried to overcome them. The purpose of this study is to provide an in-depth understanding of expatriates' subjective experiences and suggest practical solutions to manage their stress and burnout conditions. This research is expected to provide guidance for manufacturing companies in improving the well-being and performance of their expatriates.

Keywords: Stress, Burnout, Expatriate, Manufacture Company, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

The era of globalization has led to an increasing number of people working internationally as part of their careers. Global expansion has resulted in the internationalization of companies. The rise of foreign companies that expand their activities not only in their country, but also on an international scale.   The importance of international human resource management, as a consequence, requires employees to develop new work and communication skills in a short period of time in order to keep up with the changes.

Nowadays, many manufacturing companies have started sending their employees abroad as expatriates to manage international operations, expand markets, and integrate their global operations. This use of expatriates not only brings advantages in terms of knowledge transfer and cross-cultural skill development, but also presents significant challenges especially in terms of their psychological well-being.

Expatriates are individuals who live in a country other than their home country, on a temporary or permanent basis, for professional or career development reasons, and who are assigned by a company or organization (Harzing, 2007). As an employee working outside their home country, they often face high pressure in adjusting to a new and culturally different work environment. Differences in language, social norms, value systems and ways of interacting in the workplace can create significant stress for the individual.

Expatriates are often hired to fill strategic and technical positions in these companies, bringing with them international expertise and perspectives that can provide a competitive advantage. However, the transition to a new work environment is not always smooth and can present significant challenges for expatriates.

Previous studies have shown that expatriates are prone to high levels of stress and burnout due to intense job demands, lack of social support, social isolation, and environmental uncertainty. The demand to achieve high performance targets in an unfamiliar environment can drain their emotional and physical energy, which in turn can reduce their productivity and work quality.

Social discomfort and difficulty in adjusting to new environments can also increase their stress levels. Over time, this chronic stress can result in emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion leading to burnout, which is characterized by feelings of profound fatigue, inability to focus, as well as feelings of helplessness against mounting tasks. Therefore, it is important for organizations and companies sending expatriates to provide sufficient support and consider effective stress management strategies to minimize the risk of burnout that can be detrimental both to the individual and to the productivity of the company.

Burnout or deep emotional exhaustion and depersonalization towards work can be a serious problem for expatriates. It not only impacts their mental and physical health, but can also affect interpersonal relationships, work motivation, and overall performance.

In manufacturing companies, where working conditions often demand high levels of performance and great flexibility, the management of stress and burnout in expatriates is a crucial challenge. Effective strategies in managing stress and preventing burnout in expatriates can improve the overall operational success of the company, as well as strengthen the long-term commitment of their international employees.

Therefore, this study aims to deeply investigate the factors that cause stress and burnout in expatriates in manufacturing companies through a qualitative approach. By better understanding these factors, it is hoped that practical solutions can be developed that can assist companies in managing and reducing the negative impact of stress and burnout on their expatriates. Unlike previous research that mainly focused on general expatriate adaptation, this study offers a novel perspective by examining stress and burnout within the unique work conditions of the manufacturing industry, providing a new framework for understanding expatriate well-being in high-intensity environments.

According to Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk (2005), there are several main factors that cause stress and burnout in expatriates, including high job demands, social isolation, environmental uncertainty, and lack of social support. Black & Gregersen's (1991) study highlighted the importance of cultural adjustment and organizational support in reducing expatriate stress levels. Meanwhile, Harzing & Feely's (2008) study suggests that effective management strategies, such as an integrative approach to local culture and family support, can help reduce the risk of burnout in expatriates. However, existing findings have not fully captured the role of industry-specific pressures and organizational structures in shaping expatriate stress responses, making this study particularly relevant.

This research may also make a significant contribution to human resource management theory, especially in the context of managing cultural diversity and global employee well-being. Given this background, this study is expected to provide valuable insights for HR practitioners and managers of manufacturing companies in optimizing the use and well-being of their expatriates.

RESEARCH METHOD

The type of research used is qualitative research with a case study method. In-depth interviews were conducted to collect data from expatriates working in manufacturing companies. The research respondents were 11 expatriates working in the manufacturing company PT XYZ. They were chosen because they have experiences that are relevant to the research topic. The money data collection technique conducted in this study is through in-depth interviews with expatriates. Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes and was recorded with permission from the respondents. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. Data processing was done by transcribing data from the questionnaires, summarizing and analyzing. In addition, seeking information from previous research to serve as a theoretical basis and reference in processing data, by reading, studying, examining and reviewing literature in the form of books, journals, papers, and previous

studies related to the problem under study. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, data triangulation was applied through multiple verification processes. This triangulation was carried out by comparing primary data obtained from interviews with secondary data sources, including company reports, expatriate policy documents, and official statistics related to expatriate working conditions. Additionally, expert opinions and literature from previous research were incorporated to cross-check and validate the patterns emerging from the interviews. The triangulation process was conducted in three stages: first, methodological triangulation, which involved verifying interview data with document analysis and literature review; second, source triangulation, where data from different expatriates were compared to identify consistency and divergence in experiences; and third, investigator triangulation, in which peer debriefing with other researchers was conducted to minimize potential bias and enhance analytical rigor (Piperopoulos, 2010). The data processing stage is: transcribing the interview results, interpreting and coding them, and analyzing them. Then the results of data analysis will be used to identify the context, determine the process and evaluate theoretical integration (Corbin, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The respondents of this study consisted of 11 expatriates who worked at PT. XYZ. The majority of respondents are all Japanese expatriate between 30-45 years old, with more than 1 year of work experience in PT. XYZ.

The results of the thematic analysis identified five main themes as causes of stress and burnout in expatriates:

1. Job Demands
   All respondents reported that high workloads and pressure to achieve targets were the main causes of their stress. The inability to meet high expectations within tight deadlines not only increases pressure but also contributes to a sense of diminished job satisfaction, further exacerbating emotional exhaustion.
2. Job Control
   Some respondents felt that they did not have enough control over their work, leading to feelings of helplessness. Limited autonomy in decision-making can intensify the impact of job demands, making expatriates feel restricted in managing their workload effectively, which in turn accelerates burnout.
3. Social Isolation
   Lack of social support from family and friends, as well as difficulties in building relationships at work, increased feelings of loneliness and isolation. This isolation magnifies the stress caused by high job demands and low job control, as expatriates struggle to find emotional and psychological relief outside of work.
4. Environmental Uncertainty
   Unstable political and economic conditions in the destination country add to anxiety and stress levels. The unpredictability of the external environment further reduces expatriates' sense of job control, amplifying their psychological distress and making adaptation even more challenging.
5. Language Difficulties
   Language barriers pose a big challenge for many respondents, especially in communicating with coworkers and locals. The inability to communicate effectively not only hinders social integration but also limits expatriates' ability to exert control over their work, creating additional frustration and compounding the effects of stress and burnout.

Discussion

The findings of this study are in line with existing literature regarding stress and burnout in expatriates. Job demands, job control, and social support are the main factors that have been

identified in previous research. The addition of findings regarding environmental uncertainty and language difficulties provide new insights into the challenges faced by expatriates in the manufacturing company PT XYZ. These five factors are interconnected, forming a cycle where excessive job demands and lack of control increase stress, while social isolation, uncertainty, and language barriers further prevent expatriates from coping effectively.

Job demands and job control have a direct impact on expatriates' psychological well-being. High workloads combined with limited autonomy create an environment where expatriates feel overwhelmed and powerless, making them more susceptible to stress. Social isolation further exacerbates this issue, as the lack of emotional and professional support prevents expatriates from finding relief or effective coping mechanisms. Without a strong support system, expatriates may struggle to adjust, leading to decreased motivation, lower productivity, and an increased risk of burnout.

Environmental uncertainty plays a crucial role in amplifying stress levels. Political instability, economic fluctuations, and sudden regulatory changes create additional stressors that expatriates cannot control. This unpredictability adds to their sense of vulnerability, making it harder for them to focus on work-related responsibilities. Moreover, language difficulties not only hinder communication but also limit expatriates' ability to navigate daily life, further reinforcing their sense of isolation and helplessness. The combination of these factors leads to chronic stress, which, if left unaddressed, eventually manifests as burnout.

Burnout does not only affect the individual but also has significant implications for the organization. When expatriates experience prolonged stress and emotional exhaustion, their performance declines, decision-making abilities are impaired, and their commitment to the company may weaken. Over time, high turnover rates among expatriates can result in increased recruitment and training costs for the company. Additionally, the negative impact of burnout can extend beyond the expatriates themselves, influencing team dynamics and overall workplace morale.

Therefore, companies must implement targeted interventions to mitigate the risk of stress and burnout among expatriates. Providing adequate job resources, such as clear performance expectations, greater autonomy, and access to psychological support, can help expatriates feel more in control of their work. Facilitating social integration through mentorship programs, networking events, and cultural adaptation training can also reduce feelings of isolation. Addressing environmental uncertainty through proactive communication and crisis management strategies can help expatriates feel more secure in their assignments. Lastly, language training programs and workplace policies that encourage inclusive communication can improve expatriates' ability to interact effectively with colleagues and the local community, reducing frustration and stress. By recognizing and addressing these interrelated factors holistically, companies can create a supportive environment that enhances expatriates' resilience, job satisfaction, and overall well-being. This, in turn, can lead to better performance, higher retention rates, and long-term success for both the expatriates and the organization.

CONCLUSION

This study identified five main factors causing stress and burnout in expatriates at PT XYZ: high job demands, lack of good job control, social isolation in the workplace causing expatriates to feel lonely, environmental uncertainty increasing expatriate anxiety and stress levels, and language difficulties. These factors interact with each other and exacerbate stress and burnout conditions. However, the management of PT XYZ has done several ways to reduce the level of stress and burnout of expatriates by conducting intercultural training, having Indonesian language lessons and bonding between expatriates and local employees by holding sports competitions within the company. This study makes a significant contribution to HR practitioners and management of manufacturing companies in managing international human resources. By understanding the factors that cause stress and burnout in expatriates, companies can develop more effective policies to improve the well-being and performance of their international employees. Implementation of the

proposed practical solutions can help minimize the negative impact of stress and burnout on expatriates, as well as improve the retention of international talent in the long run.

References

Bakker, A. B. (2007). The Job Demands-Resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 22*(3), 309-328. https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940710733115

Black, J. S. (1991). Toward a comprehensive model of international adjustment: An integration of multiple theoretical perspectives. *Academy of Management Review, 16*(2), 291-317. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1991.4278938

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Cox, T., & Griffiths, A. (1995). The nature and measurement of work stress: Theory and practice. In J. R. Wilson & E. N. Corlett (Eds.), *Evaluation of human work* (pp. 783-803). London: Taylor & Francis.

Harzing, A.-W., & Feely, A. J. (2008). The language barrier and its implications for HQ-subsidiary relationships. *Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal, 15*, 10.1108/13527600810848827.

Kalliath, T., & Kalliath, P. (2014). Work-family conflict: Coping strategies adopted by social workers. *Journal of Social Work Practice, 28*(1), 111-126. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2013.828278

Lazarus, R. S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping.* New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (n.d.). Understanding the burnout experience: Recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry, 15*(2), 103-111. https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311

Piperopoulos, P. (2010). Tacit knowledge and emotional intelligence: The 'intangible' values of SMEs. *Strategic Change, 19*(3-4), 125-139. https://doi.org/10.1002/jsc.836

World Health Organization (WHO). (n.d.). Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International classification of diseases. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/burn-out/en/