

# **Moderating Effect of Job Factors and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) on the Relationship between Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment and Intention to Leave the Host Country: A Study of Expatriates in Indonesia<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

In general, research finds that job satisfaction and organizational commitment are negatively related to employees' turnover (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski & Erez, 2001). In other words, the higher the satisfaction and commitment, the less the employees intend to leave the host country. Literature suggests that work (job) and non work (job) factors may affect the aforementioned variables (e.g. Black, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1991; Gregersen and Black, 1992; Mitchell et al., 2001; Naumann, 1992).

Thus, it could be said that such factors may moderate the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and expatriates' intention to leave. Job factors include role conflict, role ambiguity and job characteristics (skill variety, task identity, task significance, feedback and autonomy) (Naumann, 1992), while non job factors are represented by leader-member exchange (LMX) (Kraimer, Wayne and Jaworski, 2001).

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Based on the data collected from 109 expatriates working for multinational companies in Indonesia, this study empirically examines the extent (1) job factors and LMX moderates the relationship between job satisfaction and intention to leave, and (2) job factors and LMX moderates the relationship between organizational commitment and intention to leave. This study then finds that role ambiguity moderates the relationship between expatriates' job satisfaction and organizational commitment and intention to leave as well as positively relates to intention to leave. This study also finds that role conflict moderates the relationship between job satisfaction and intention to leave, and that LMX moderates the relationship between organizational commitment and intention to leave.

More and more companies have established and increased their businesses abroad. Alkhafaji (1996) identified reasons for such actions. One is called aggressive reasons which consist of extending their market, earning higher profit, and/or taking advantage of opportunities abroad. The other is called defensive reasons which aim to reduce their dependency on domestic market, ensure the supply of raw materials for production, obtain new technology, and/or sustain growth.

To run business activities abroad, companies need (additional) employees. According to Bohlander, Scott and Sherman (2001), such employees can be: (1) parent country nationals (known as PCNs) who come from the country where the business is originated, (2) host country nationals (HCNs) who come from the country where the business is actually operated, and (3) third country nationals (TCNs) who come from neither of the above. The term expatriates generally refer to PCNs and TCNs.

Feldman and Thomas (1992) argued that companies send PCNs and/or TCNs because there are no HCNs who can fulfill the opening positions: either no HCNs are qualified (lack of quality) or no HCNs are available (lack of quantity). Another possible reason is to closely supervise the business operations abroad (lack of trust to HCNs). However, having expatriates means additional costs. Therefore, companies have to make sure that expatriates will perform as expected.

Expatriates' failure to perform not only causes early return and high turnover, but also costs multinational corporations (MNCs) roughly US\$60,000 to US\$150,000 per expatriate coming back home (Baker and Ivancevich, 1971; Black, 1988; Copeland and Griggs, 1985; Kraimer, Wayne and Jaworski, 2001; Misa and Fabricatore, 1979; Naumann, 1992; Tung, 1982). U. S. MNCs are the ones that suffer from higher turnover of their expatriates compared to that of MNCs from other countries (Naumann, 1992). The rate could reach 70 percent, especially for U. S. MNCs operate in less developed countries (Desatnick and Bennett, 1978; Lanier, 1979).

Expatriates' early return could be predicted from whether they intent to stay or leave the host country (Gregersen and Black, 1992; Naumann, 1992). In general, job satisfaction and organizational commitment have empirically and consistently been indicators of expatriates' intention to leave (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski & Erez, 2001). Namely, the more the expatriates satisfy with their job and commit to the company, the less they intent to leave the host country.

Moreover, literature shows that work (job) and non work (job) factors may affect intention to leave, job satisfaction and organizational commitment (e.g. Black, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1991; Gregersen and Black, 1992; Mitchell et al., 2001; Naumann, 1992). In other words, these factors may moderate the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and intention to leave. According to Naumann (1992), job factors include role conflict, role ambiguity and job characteristics (skill variety, task identity, task significance, feedback and autonomy).

In addition, referring to stress management theories, Kraimer et al. (2001) acknowledged the role of social support as non job factors in helping expatriates adjust to the new environment which in turn develop job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and make them stay in the host country. Social support is broadly defined as “the availability of helping relationships and the quality of those relationships” (Leavy, 1983, p. 5). Mitchell et al. (2001, p. 1104) called such a support as links which are basically “formal or informal connections between a person (an expatriate) and institutions and other people.”

Kahn and Quinn (1976) further indicated that social support are characterized by (1) aid, which is the extent the support source (relationship partner) provides expatriates with relevant information and assistance in order for them to perform at work, (2) affect, which is a mutual attraction between an expatriate and his/her relationship partner, and (3) affirmation, which is the extent the relationship reaffirms expatriates’ abilities and beliefs in dealing with the stress of the new situation. These characteristics are captured by leader-member exchange (LMX), particularly the relationship between an expatriate and his/her local subordinates (Kraimer et al., 2001).

Based on the arguments above, this study focuses on and examines the moderating effect of job factors and LMX on the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and intention to leave. In the subsequent paragraphs, we provide detail arguments for the hypotheses on the direction of the moderating effect. Such arguments are formulated by reviewing the existing and relevant literature. The hypotheses are then tested empirically and, finally, the results are analyzed and discussed for theoretical and practical implications as well as for future research.

### **Review on Job Factors Literature**

Robbins (2001) defines job as a collection of interdependent tasks that must be completed by an individual employee. The completion however depends on how much the load of such tasks which then determine how much time needed for the completion. An employee who holds a job (called a jobholder) is expected to behave in a certain way to meet performance requirements. This expected behavior is known as role, and role may provide the context for job satisfaction because role offers expectation that the jobholder must satisfy. In other words, job satisfaction occurs when the jobholder meets the expectation.

Unfortunately, the expectation for one job is not always clear nor in accordance to other jobs. Unclear expectation leads to role ambiguity, as inconsistent expectation leads to role conflict (George and Jones, 2002). In a new culturally work environment, the ambiguity and conflict create high uncertainty and frustrate an expatriate (Black et al., 1991). As ‘a new kid on the block’, he or she will be confused what or which

expectation(s) to follow. To make the matter worst, whatever the expatriate does will never satisfy overall job requirements. If the frustration gets higher and higher, the expatriate will experience a great deal of stress which results in his or her detachment from the foreign subsidiary and eventually in his or her decision to voluntarily leave the host country (Bhaskar-Srinivas, Harrison, Shaffer and Luk, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2001; Naumann, 1992).

Correspondingly, the presence of role ambiguity and role conflict could suggest an already dissatisfied and uncommitted expatriate to quickly leave the host country. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

*H1A: Role ambiguity and role conflict will moderate the negative relationship between job satisfaction and the intention to leave the host country (Indonesia), in which high role ambiguity and role conflict will strengthen such a negative relationship.*

*H1B: Role ambiguity and role conflict will moderate the negative relationship between organizational commitment and the intention to leave the host country (Indonesia), in which high role ambiguity and role conflict will strengthen such a negative relationship.*

In addition to role ambiguity and role conflict, job characteristics have received support from the literature in relation to the extent an expatriate is satisfied with job, committed to the foreign subsidiary and willing to stay in the host country. According to Hackman and Oldham (1980), job characteristics consist of:

1. Skill variety, which refers to the extent an individual (expatriate) is required to perform many different skills to carry out a job assigned to him or her.
2. Task identity, which refers to the extent an expatriate performs a complete, identifiable (from beginning to end) piece of work.
3. Task significance, which refers to the extent an expatriate performs a job that affect the success of others within or outside the organization.
4. Autonomy, which refers to the extent an expatriate experiences freedom, independence and discretion in carrying out his or her job.
5. Feedback, which refers to the extent an expatriate obtains direct and clear information on the effectiveness of his or her performance.

Hackman and Oldham suggested that a job contains all five matters above will provide a jobholder (the expatriate) a sense of meaningfulness and responsibility of the job, a sense found to be related to increased satisfaction and organizational commitment. Meaningful job will also set a stage for the expatriate to lengthen his or her stay in a foreign country to gain experience useful for their career advancement in the future. More specifically, the presence of meaningful job could suggest an already satisfied and committed expatriate to prolong the stay in the host country. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

- H2A: Job characteristics will moderate the negative relationship between job satisfaction and the intention to leave the host country (Indonesia), in which high job characteristics will strengthen such a negative relationship.*
- H2B: Job characteristics will moderate the negative relationship between organizational commitment and the intention to leave the host country (Indonesia), in which high job characteristics will strengthen such a negative relationship.*

### **Review on LMX Literature**

LMX literature discusses dyadic relationship between a leader (superior or boss) and his or her immediate member (subordinate). In the case of international assignment, it could be the relationship between an expatriate (as leader) and his or her immediate subordinate, or the relationship between an expatriate (as subordinate) and his or her immediate boss. This study, however, focuses on the relationship between an expatriate (as leader) with his or her immediate, local subordinates for two reasons: (1) most expatriates are assigned in a higher level position, and (2) most expatriates have locals as his or her direct subordinates.

LMX literature argues that a leader and a member who have a higher quality relationship often exchange material and non-material goods that extend beyond their formal job descriptions (Liden, Sparrowe and Wayne, 1997). How far beyond may not be predetermined. The higher the relationship quality, the further the extension could go. It means that higher quality relationship may involve far-reaching boss-subordinate exchange, in which its exact nature cannot be determined in advance. An expatriate boss who has such a rich relationship with his or her local subordinate will likely enjoy his or her stay in the host country.

On the other hand, Toh and DeNisi (2005) argued that expatriate's failure to have a good (a high quality) relationship with his or her local subordinates may lead the expatriate to lose credibility in the eyes of the locals. Additionally, poor (low quality) expatriates-locals relationship might increase subordinates' counterproductive work behavior (ranging from tardiness and absenteeism to insubordination and sabotage) which eventually lower unit's performance and result in the expatriates to leave the host country.

Furthermore, Liden et al. (1997) concluded that high quality relationship is positively related to such favorable attitudes as job satisfaction and organizational commitment. This positive association is understandable considering that expatriate who gets full support from his or her local subordinates is generally satisfied to his or her work and willing to do his or her best for that particular foreign subsidiary. In other words, the presence of high quality relationship could suggest an already satisfied and committed expatriate to lengthen the stay in the host country. Correspondingly, we hypothesize that:

- H3A: LMX will moderate the negative relationship between job satisfaction and the intention to leave the host country (Indonesia), in which high quality LMX will strengthen such a negative relationship.*

*H3B: LMX will moderate the negative relationship between organizational commitment and the intention to leave the host country (Indonesia), in which high quality LMX will strengthen such a negative relationship.*

### **Research Methods**

*Respondents.* Testing hypotheses above, we randomly distributed questionnaire via mail and/or email to 400 expatriates who work for MNCs in Jakarta, Indonesia. Of 400, 109 were sent back, which make 27.25 percent of participation rate. The respondents are mostly men (73.4 percent), between 31 to 35 years of age (31.2 percent), holds a postgraduate degree (67.7 percent), have 1 to 5 years of international experience (51.4 percent) plus up to 5 years working experience in Indonesia (90.8 percent) and yet cannot speak and write in local (Indonesian) language (58.7 percent).

*Measures.* Questionnaire used to assess role ambiguity and role conflict consist of 12 items ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and 8 items ( $\alpha = .74$ ) taken from Rizo, House and Lirtzman (1970). Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS) (Hackman dan Oldham, 1980) ( $\alpha = .85$ ) was used to measure job characteristics. LMX quality was assessed using 12 items of LMX-MDM ( $\alpha = .87$ ) developed by Liden and Maslyn (1998). Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) (Weiss, Davis and England, 1967) ( $\alpha = .82$ ) was used to measure job satisfaction, while organizational commitment was assessed by 15 items ( $\alpha = .86$ ) developed by Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982). Questionnaire for measuring the intention to leave Indonesia consists of 14 items ( $\alpha = .80$ ) adopted from Hom, Griffeth and Sellaro (1984).

*Control Variables.* Seven demographics variables are included as control variables in this study. They are expatriate's gender, age, educational background, ability to speak local (Indonesian) language, overall work experience, international work experience, and work experience in the host country under study (Indonesia).

*Analysis.* All hypotheses were tested using multiple regressions analysis in which all control variables, role ambiguity, role conflict, leader-member exchange, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, the interaction of role ambiguity and job satisfaction, the interaction of role ambiguity and organizational commitment, the interaction of role conflict and job satisfaction, the interaction of role conflict and organizational commitment, the interaction of leader-member exchange and job satisfaction, and the interaction of leader-member exchange and organizational commitment are independent variables and intention to leave is dependent variable. Moderating effects are indicated by the significant effect of the above interactions on the dependent variable.

### **Results**

*Descriptive Information.* Table 1 shows that, on 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) scale, the respondents' role tend not to be ambiguous (relatively clear) but somewhat conflicting. The job they hold inclines to provide them with meaningfulness and responsibility. They also tend to have higher quality relationship with their local subordinates, be satisfied with their job and be committed to the foreign subsidiary where they are assigned to. Consequently, they are likely to stay in the host country.

Moreover, Table 1 shows that role ambiguity is significantly related to all variables but intention to leave Indonesia. Role ambiguity is only positively related to role conflict. The insignificant correlation of role ambiguity to intention to leave indicates the moderating function of role ambiguity (no direct relation between role ambiguity and intention to leave). Role conflict is significantly and negatively related to all variables. Although relatively small, the significant correlation to intention to leave may indicate that role conflict have direct connection to intention to leave.

Table 1 also shows that job characteristics and leader-member exchange have significant and negative association with role ambiguity and role conflict, but significant and positive correlation to all other variables (including to one another). As for role conflict, significant and positive correlation to intention to leave may indicate that job characteristics and leader-member exchange, respectively, have direct connection to intention to leave.

Similarly, job satisfaction and organizational commitment have significant and negative association with role ambiguity and role conflict, but significant and positive correlation to all other variables (including to one another). Yet these variables do not have significant association with intention to leave Indonesia. It means high job satisfaction and organizational commitment may not be enough to prolong the expatriate's stay in Indonesia; there may be other variables to strengthen the connection between job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and intention to leave.

**TABLE 1**  
**Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations**

| Variable                        | Mean | s.d. | 1      | 2      | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6   | 7 |
|---------------------------------|------|------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-----|---|
| 1. Role ambiguity               | 2.68 | .81  |        |        |       |       |       |     |   |
| 2. Role conflict                | 3.32 | .80  | .73**  |        |       |       |       |     |   |
| 3. Job characteristics          | 3.93 | .33  | -.39** | -.69** |       |       |       |     |   |
| 4. Leader-member Exchange       | 4.36 | .58  | -.21*  | -.40** | .49** |       |       |     |   |
| 5. Job satisfaction             | 4.38 | .59  | -.58** | -.65** | .70** | .57** |       |     |   |
| 6. Organizational Commitment    | 4.43 | .81  | -.63** | -.73** | .64** | .20*  | .81** |     |   |
| 7. Intention to leave Indonesia | 3.87 | .75  | -.098  | -.29** | .21*  | .21*  | .07   | .09 |   |

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01

*Hypotheses Tests.* The result of hypotheses tests can be seen in Table 2. It shows that the interaction between role conflict and job satisfaction and the interaction between role ambiguity and job satisfaction are significant and positive. This finding supports Hypothesis 1A. In addition, role ambiguity is positively and significantly related to intention to leave, which means the higher the role ambiguity, the more the expatriate intends to leave Indonesia.

However, only the interaction between role ambiguity and organizational commitment is positive and significant which partially supports Hypothesis 1B. This finding may be related to the fact that role conflict is independently related to intention to leave (see Table 2) which indicates that role conflict may directly affect intention to leave. In this case, the effect is negative: the higher the role conflict, the more the expatriate is eager to stay longer in Indonesia.

None of the interactions involving job characteristics are significant. This means Hypotheses 2A and 2B are not supported. In addition, job characteristics do not independently affect intention to leave. This finding indicates that the extent the expatriate's job is meaningful may not be considered when he or she makes decision to leave Indonesia.

**TABLE 2**  
**Result of Hypotheses Tests**

| Variable                        | Estimate | s.e.   |
|---------------------------------|----------|--------|
| Gender (=male)                  | .031     | .088   |
| Age                             | .119     | .043** |
| Education                       | -.086    | .073   |
| Ability to speak local language | -.064    | .037   |
| Overall work experience         | -.049    | .078   |
| International work experience   | .139     | .067*  |
| Work experience in Indonesia    | -.080    | .106   |

|  |         |         |
|--|---------|---------|
| Role ambiguity                                     | 16.504  | 1.546** |
| Role conflict                                      | -27.996 | 5.253** |
| Job characteristics                                | 3.451   | 2.202   |
| Leader-member exchange                             | -14.272 | 5.146** |
| Job satisfaction                                   | -26.753 | 13.653  |
| Organizational commitment                          | 2.572   | 8.883   |
| Role ambiguity x job satisfaction                  | -1.190  | .499*   |
| Role conflict x job satisfaction                   | 5.631   | 1.221** |
| Role ambiguity x organizational commitment         | -2.519  | .443**  |
| Role conflict x organizational commitment          | .757    | .642    |
| Job characteristics x job satisfaction             | 3.288   | 1.980   |
| Job characteristics x organizational commitment    | -3.860  | 1.976   |
| Leader-member exchange x job satisfaction          | -.400   | 1.180   |
| Leader-member exchange x organizational commitment | 3.958   | .542**  |

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01

R squared = .852; adjusted R squared = .816

For leader-member exchange, only its interaction with organizational commitment is significant and positive which supports Hypothesis 3A but the interaction with job satisfaction is not significant which does not support Hypothesis 3B. This finding is due to the fact that leader-member exchange independently affects intention to leave (see Table 2) which indicates leader-member exchange play a dual role: as a moderator for job satisfaction-intention to leave and as a determinant for intention to leave. Furthermore, the direct effect is negative, which means the higher the quality of expatriate's relationship with his or her local subordinate is, the less likely he or she leaves Indonesia.

## Discussion

*Theoretical Implications.* In general, this study's findings indicate that expatriate's intention to leave the host country can be seen in two folds. Traditionally, intention to leave is seen as a failure. This study's findings support that the expatriate leaves the host country because he or she cannot handle role ambiguity and cannot develop good relationship with his or her local subordinates. Yet, role conflict negatively related to intention to leave. Thus, an expatriate may also intent to stay longer in certain host country because he or she enjoys the conflict; the expatriate may perceive conflict as challenge.

Additionally, this study's findings confirm the literature that role ambiguity provides the context that strengthens the (negative) relationship between job satisfaction and intention to leave, and between organizational commitment and intention to leave. The findings also confirm the literature: (1) role conflict provides the context that strengthens the (negative) relationship between organizational commitment and intention to leave, and (2) leader-member exchange provides the context that strengthens the (negative) relationship between organizational commitment and intention to leave. In short, the findings confirm that high satisfaction and commitment are not enough to prevent leave.

*Practical Implications.* This study's findings advise that MNCs should pay attention to the role an expatriate will play in a job in a host country. Ambiguous role could result in an early departure of an expatriate which could cost MNCs hundreds of thousands dollars. Preventing that, prior to the arrival, MNCs should review the organization of its foreign subsidiary, particularly a unit, department or division where the expatriate will be assigned to. Any potential role ambiguity found from such a review should be clarified in advance.

Moreover, MNCs should train expatriates on how to develop a high quality relationship with their local subordinates. This is according to the findings that high quality leader-member exchange could suggest an early departure of an expatriate.

Nevertheless, MNCs should also be aware of the possibility of expatriate's intention to leave because of low role conflict. In this case, the expatriate may perceive role conflict as challenge. Therefore, MNCs should not eliminate role conflict completely but need to keep it under control because too excessive conflict could lead a satisfied expatriate hesitant to prolong his or her stay in a host country.

*Suggestions for Future Research.* This study survives from several limitations which warrant further research. First, as seen in Table 2, adjusted R square is .816 which means there are variables that can explain an expatriate's intention to leave but has not been accommodated in this study. One variable that deserves further consideration is the life of an expatriate outside the workplace: the extent he or she can get along with local people other than the employees of the subsidiary. Ability to develop relationships with these people is related to cross-cultural adjustment. Naumann (1992) indicated that better cross-cultural adjustment brought more positive work attitudes.

Future research should also deal with expatriate's family situation, especially level of comfort with international assignment i.e. the life in the host country. The extent the family (spouse and/or children) enjoy the life in the new place may determine their attitudes towards the international assignment, which in turn may affect the expatriate's work attitudes (Kraimer et al., 2001; Naumann, 1991).

Second limitation is related to respondent characteristics which are male dominant. Thus, future research should focus on predicting the intention to leave for female expatriates. This study is also cross-sectional in nature which limits our ability to draw precise causal conclusions. Accordingly, we suggest future longitudinal study to better predict expatriate's intention to leave.

Finally, we suggest that a more comprehensive model of expatriate's intention to leave is examined across countries and/or continents. Having done that, we could indicate the extent the national culture differences affect intention to leave.

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