

With the rise of global mobility, researchers say the topic of international employees' adjustment needs attention

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International employees constitute almost 5% of the global workforce. A recent study by Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) revealed the

under-researched areas in international employees' adjustment and proposed a future research agenda.

According to the team of researchers from Lithuania and Germany, who analyzed 222 [scientific articles](#) on the adjustment of international employees from the last 32 years, most papers in this thematic field (72%) focus on the adjustment of assigned expatriates, i.e. those employees who are sent abroad by their organization.

The least researched international employee group is migrants. They represent around 4% of the world's population; this number has increased threefold in the last 50 years.

"With the rise of international human mobility, more attention needs to be paid to self-initiated expatriates who go abroad on their initiative to work, and migrants," says Vilmantė Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė, a professor at KTU School of Economics and Business, a co-author of the study.

Within the management and business domain, self-initiated expatriates are defined as persons who relocate to a different country for work by their initiative and plan to stay abroad for a limited amount of time. Whereas migrants are those who move to another country intending to stay there and, in often cases, become citizens.

According to Prof. Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė, self-initiated expatriates and migrants constitute the largest part of international employees worldwide.

Africa with high migration flow is overlooked

In the study, conducted by KTU and the University of Bamberg, Germany, scientists, 222 articles spanning from 1990 to 2022 were analyzed. They studied the abstracts of the papers from the Web of

Science Core Collection database aiming to track the field's evolution over time and, by examining covered topics, to pinpoint new possible research directions.

The work is [published](#) in the journal *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*.

Besides the above-mentioned lack of research regarding migrants and self-initiated expatriates, several other scientific knowledge gaps were indicated. For example, most study samples comprised individuals moving between Asia, Europe, and North America, overlooking Africa with high migration flows.

"Moreover, our study highlighted the factors of international employee adjustment which can help businesses understand how they can contribute to better adjustment of their international employees within and outside the organization. The successful adjustment would increase not only international employees' well-being but also their productivity which might have a positive effect on the organization's competitive advantage," says Irma Banevičienė, a co-author of the study and a researcher at KTU School of Economics and Business.

According to Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė, organizational support should include not only information on work-related matters but also on living in the country (transport, shopping, health care) and the necessary facilities. The support provided by host country nationals is also important, helping international employees to understand the local environment, both at work and in the country.

"Although these studies were predominant among expatriates sent by organizations, support is important for all workers, not least for self-initiated expatriates, who find their jobs themselves," emphasizes Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė.

In the articles analyzed, individual factors were researched most frequently (155), followed by organizational (95) and country-related (78) factors. However, only 14 articles investigated how demographics might affect international employee adjustment.

Curiosity and open-mindedness are useful traits for adjustment

Although this study does not investigate [cultural differences](#) among international employees, Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė says that, based on the previous research, certain tendencies can be observed.

"To use Hofstede's most popular classification, countries can be divided into individualistic vs. collectivistic, short-term oriented vs. long-term oriented, and so on. Those, coming from individualistic countries, are more focused on their personal achievements and gains, as opposed to people from collectivistic countries who are focused on cooperation and society," says the KTU professor.

She singles out a certain cultural intelligence as the most helpful individual characteristic for international [employee](#) adjustment and says, "Curiosity, interest in different countries, travel, knowledge of foreign languages and a [positive attitude](#) will open the door to more successful cultural understanding and adjustment."

According to Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė, global mobility will not likely decrease and more and more companies will face the need to employ staff from abroad—the demand for the workforce is growing, especially in rapidly aging European countries. Although such countries as the U.S. and Germany remain the most attractive for employees from overseas, migration flows affect all.

"In our recent [study](#), we noticed that Lithuania and Estonia have shifted their status from migrant-sending countries (as they have been since regaining independence in 1990) to migrant-receiving countries.

"Although at a national level, these countries are not yet fully prepared to receive international employees—there is a lack of information in [different languages](#) and basic guidelines—there is a lot of support for the international employees at the organizational level," says Prof. Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė.

More information: Irma Baneviciene et al, Assessing the status quo of international employees' adjustment research, 1990–2022: a review and future research agenda, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* (2024). [DOI: 10.1057/s41599-024-03098-y](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03098-y)

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