

Going from Spain and Latin America to Central Asia: decision-making of expatriation and meaning of work

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Abstract

In this paper I want to describe and compare the relationship between meaning of work (MOW) among managers of different levels and different companies, analyze the socio-economic and work implications that might have, for the companies and the employees, the decisions of encouraging, accepting or rejecting the delocalization according to the meaning managers give to work, to social responsibility and to delocalization and to establish a scale that allows showing the behavior of the managers in a delocalizing environment and the responsibility before work. The data was collected through a brief questionnaire handed out among one hundred sixty five Spanish (Catalan) managers of different levels, age and gender, and with a different degree of responsibility. The goal of the paper is to find out the meaning of work and the attitude before the potential internationalization of intermediate level employees working for companies which are considering the possibility of an international expansion to Central Asia.

Introduction

The second quarter of 2003 was a particularly intense period regarding decisions, discourse, impact and measures of business delocalization in Spain (Fig. 1). The future incorporation of new countries to the EU, which are providers of labor, cheap raw materials and favorable settling conditions, implied not only a debate about what delocalization can give rise to, but also the implementation of

measures aimed at cutting budget, and changing and reviewing (which in all cases meant making a decision about it) the jobs of hundreds of people of all levels and hierarchical positions. What is the relationship between a production delocalization and the meaning of work? How many companies have suggested a working delocalization to their workers and managers together with production delocalization?

Fig. 1.

Delocalization of Spanish (catalan) companies September-December 2003

Industry	Sector	Company	Place	Employees
Publishing	Paper supp.	Printer	Pallejà	98
Electricity	Metal	Novalux	La Garriga	100
Textile	Textile	Blanc Bell	La Selva	140
Car supplier	Chemical	TMI	Baix Llobregat	143
Car supplier	Siderurgical	Valeo Clima	Sant Just Desvern	150
Electricity	Siderurgical	Ferraz	Hospitalet	160
Textile	Textile	Fispe	Prat Llobregat	170
Food	Metal	Autotex	Vacarisses	170
Car supplier	Chemical	Gates Vulca	Baix Llobregat	235
Food	Food	Altadis	Tarragona	240
Car supplier	Metal	Valeo	S. Esteve Sesrovires	261
Car supplier	Metal	Valeo Clabauto	Abrera	406
Electricity	Metal	Samsung	Palau Plegamans	446

Own design on the basis economic press and Spanish Chamber of Commerce 2004

In general terms, we do not know. This is why, in the last couple of years, the study of delocalization and the meaning of work for people have become current topics not only for management studies but also for other social disciplines.

The goal of this paper is to find out the meaning of work and the attitude before the potential internationalization of intermediate level employees working

for companies which are considering the possibility of an international expansion.

The data was collected through a brief questionnaire handed out among one hundred sixty five managers of different levels, age and gender, and with a different degree of responsibility. Out of the 165 questionnaires handed out, we have only worked on 103 since we discarded 12 because only the first questions had been answered and 18 because they belonged to companies which had desist from initiating an internationalization process. Most of the interviews and the data collection were carried out during the training course which many managers had attended during the second quarter of 2003. The model used was a summed-up and modified version of the MOW Team's 1997 Survey but adapted to the theoretical framework resulting from the bibliographical research and the analysis of the state of affairs regarding delocalization. After that, we conducted half-an-hour non-guided personal interviews with 12 managers. The goals of the preliminary study were:

1. To describe and compare the relationship between meaning of work (MOW) among managers of different levels and different companies;
2. To analyze the socio-economic and work implications that might have, for the companies and the employees, the decisions of encouraging, accepting or rejecting the delocalization according to the meaning managers give to work, to social responsibility and to delocalization.
3. To establish a scale that allows showing the behavior of the managers in a delocalizing environment and the responsibility before work.

The meaning of work

In its first understanding of the issue, the studies on the meaning of work made us notice the potential risks that could come up depending on which of the two extreme conceptions of work are represented: the absolutely central role of work in life (Harpaz et al., 2003) and its relation with, for example, the absenteeism (Burke, 2002); and the conception of work as something dissociated from ethical, personal and social norms, and even from the companies' ethical values (Tang, Furnham, & Davis, 2002), and their serious consequences for society and for the organizations themselves.

What do we understand by 'meaning of work'? The meaning of work (MOW) is a collection of values, beliefs, attitudes and expectations that people have with relation to work. The acronym MOW (Meaning of Work) was coined in 1987 by a team of researchers made up of social scientists from 8 countries that designed, developed and implemented a research on certain groups of workers using as starting point homogenous criteria of analysis of empirical data obtained through surveys to employees of different categories.¹

In its original approach, MOW researches included only 10 groups of employees. The main goal of the research, carried out in 8 different countries by 14 researchers coming from various disciplines, was to obtain results that were comparable at a European level and that allowed us to notice the differences in MOW among the countries between 1987 and 2002. One of the theoretical problems derived from the study of meaning and local identity in work is the sense of those words or concepts. The difficult task, for instance, of finding a single definition of the term *work* (Noon & Blyton, 2002) has its counterpart in

¹ The focus groups were defined according to the same criteria and the special interest of each country. The total size of the sample was N: 5933 (Meaning of working international research team. 1987. *The meaning of working*. London: Academic press., p. 336.)

the fact that the literature on MOW generally adopts a definition according to the objectives of the study that it is trying to carry out. For the goals of our research, we think of *work* as *paid employment* (Ruiz-Quintanilla & Claes, 2000), as the MOW International Research Team defined it for its studies (MOW, 1987). As many writers maintain, an articulated theory of MOW has not been yet developed (Harpaz & Snir, 2003; Meaning of working international research team, 1987). The original model implemented by the MOW Team defined, at first, 5 basic concepts (work centrality, social norms about work, values in work, aspects of work and identification with work) that were empirically contrasted.

The MOW Team's study was set out on the basis of two premises that have been the ones that, re considered, gave rise to the study whose preliminary results we show here:

1. Ad-hoc differences we look for between countries ("culture"), because they were considered to have a bearing in the meaning of work. Culture was understood as a synonym of "national state." We do not consider a priori cultural differences as national states.
2. Management level employees were not considered. In our study, we have considered intermediate level managers.

Going to Central Asia

The work carried out within the framework of a project in which we studied globalization and culture in multinational Spanish companies with investment in Latina America (2001-2002), showed a recurrent binding use of the terms "delocalization," "social responsibility" and "work" (understood as "paid employment") by intermediate level managers. In various interviews conducted within the framework of this project we have noticed four recurrent topics:

1. concern about the loss of work;
2. reorganization and layoff of workers as a way of cutting costs directly;
3. delocalization –relocation to another country- linked, in the answers given by the interviewees, to social responsibility and the work ethics of the company;
4. the different level of willingness with regard to the work place (country) among managers of the same corporation.

According to a Spanish manager, and many others who talked about the subject using similar words, *"as soon as they find a cheaper place, they leave."* This first approach suggested the possibility of conducting some non guided interviews in which we suggested discussing with different managers how they thought companies which delocalized its production, settled or not in different countries in Europe or other continents, and did not take into account their external or internal social responsibility, or did not give their employees or managers the possibility of being expatriated should be considered from an ethical perspective. In most cases, they answered that these companies did *what was best for them*, they should not necessarily be considered as bad companies, and that (I quote), *"even if I were offered to go, I would not do it because I am from here."* They also gave us explanations such as *"I wouldn't have a problem going where they wanted me to go, but it would depend on the place I were sent to and the terms of the relocation."*

“My work is my life”

The meaning given to work and delocalization is not only related to a certain set of values but also to the local or extra-local identity that people construct from the company.

In fact, “My work is my life” or “to make a living” are frequently used and recurrent expressions with relation to employment among intermediate level management of the studied companies. This explains the increasing scientific interest of management literature in studying what people do at the time of “giving” meaning to work and why this action of “giving” tends to be more and more analyzed, especially with relation to its negative consequences for the worker’s health (Brook, 1989; Harpaz & Fu, 2002; Harpaz, Honig, & Coetsier, 2002; Parry, 2003; Sullivan, 2003), but also for the company’s emotional health. Linked to the production delocalization, the constant adjustment and failure to adjust of the personnel, the interculturality and the debates around the company’s ethics, to state what is understood by ‘work’ by those who are part of the organization is part of the organizational knowledge that is supposed to help guarantee the survival and growth of the companies and constitutes one of the arguments which finally decides its remaining in the country or its leaving it. This is the reason why to know what a company’s managers understand by “work” can be crucial at the time of the decision making when deciding whether to move the company or not. The above mentioned knowledge seems to be important for some companies, but not so important for others; that is why a comparison between different European offices, or European and Latin American offices of the same company can be useful for realizing that the meaning of work, the delocalization and the social responsibility might not be the same.

It is not the first time that a questionnaire of this kind has been drawn up,

especially from the analysis of the work practices studied from the cultural-local-national. According to this analysis, which most well-known referents had been at the time Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars (Hofstede 1991; Trompenaars 1998), there would be a direct relationship among the work practices since they are defined from the conditioning characteristics of the country where they take place. This is why the differences in work practices within a transnational organization such as IBM could be explained, as Hofstede does, using as starting point the differential elements of the nation-state where each commercial office is located while each country has its own local "culture," which conditions all meaning within the companies.

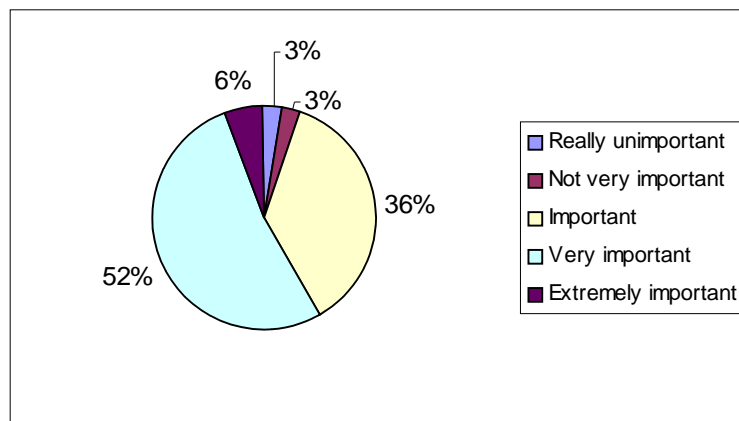
The approach we used was different. According to our approach, the different work's social practices are culturally related by the structure of the referential locality (i.e., it is always defined, *in reference to*) of the person, which specifically becomes explicit in the meaning the person gives to work in the company in the broader context of the local identity discourse, but not the national one. In fact, as Hofstede himself has suggested, the differences in these practices are not that big with relation to a supposedly "national culture" but mostly with relation to the socio-cultural characteristics of his/her social attachment, the environment, the education and, above all, to the social groups to which the employee attaches themselves to or is attached to and to the formal and informal institutions of which he/she is a member. The university, the family, the associations he/she joins and where they participate are the person's manifestation of his/her identity and allow other members of the social body to represent him/her in a certain way and, in turn, allow the person to "see himself/herself" represented.

“My future work in Central Asia”

What was the meaning managers gave to work within a context of a strong public and private discourse around delocalization? The preliminary results we have mentioned showed that managers in general consider work to be something very important for their future, and give it priority and hierarchy. To the question *Think about the next 5 or 10 years, how important will your work be for you?*, 88% of the managers answered that their work will be important or very important (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2

Think about the next 5 or 10 years, how important will your work be for you?



Own design on the basis of the 1987 MOW Team's Survey.

During the interviews we conducted, a recurrent comment was that of placing family and work at the same level. “*My work and my family are the most important things I have*”.² However, we notice a lack of reference to the local (the local identity) regarding work. As for the importance of work in their lives,

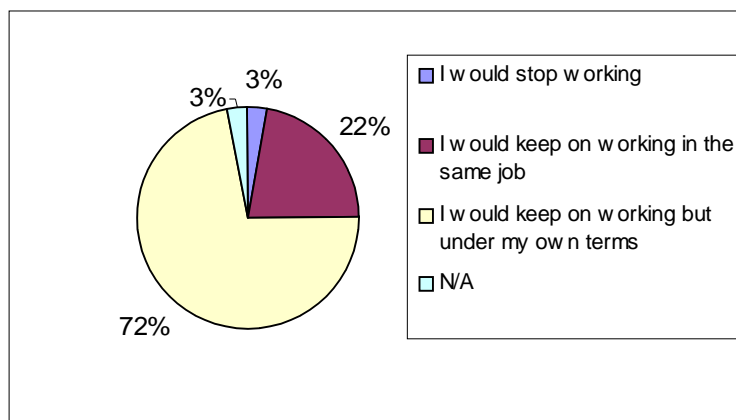
² Interview to MD, SC, and JD 2004.

managers do not modify this hierarchy according to the place they live and work. At first, we can assume that the "place" of work is overshadowed by the "importance" of work. But, as we will see later, that is not necessarily the case.

Similarly, the so-called "*lottery question*" was answered giving an important hierarchical position to work (more than 90% of the managers answered this way), and almost independently of the salary (Fig. 3). This "*lottery question*" is one of the classic questions defined by the MOW Team and it says: *Imagine you won the lottery or inherited a fortune that allowed you to live without working for the rest of your life, what would you do about your work?*

Fig. 3

Imagine you won the lottery or inherited a fortune that allowed you to live without working for the rest of your life, what would you do about your work?



Own design on the basis of the 1987 MOW Team's Survey.

In the interviews we conducted, the importance of a "*decent*" salary, "*according to my performance*" was stressed time and time again. This somehow underlies the answer "I would keep on working but on my own terms," which was the answer chosen by 72% of those surveyed. This suggests that the salary

policies within the companies represented in the preliminary sample (some 30 companies) could be reviewed; however, here "the terms" were understood not only as "salary" but also as "working conditions," with a special emphasis on the working hours. Actually, managers link more money to *"do what I want, what I like doing;"* *"the things I like to do but I can't because I don't have the time."*³

Who wants to become international?

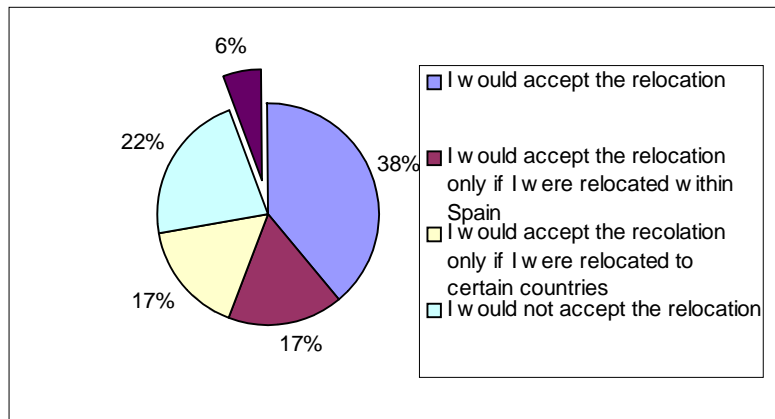
Unlike the previous question, and maybe being the most interesting thing to discover, was how relatively heterogeneous the answers to the question about delocalization and relationship with work were (*"Suppose you had to choose between losing your job and keeping it in return for being relocated somewhere else."*). Although 38% of the managers answered that they would accept being relocated, if we add those who would not accept it and those who would only accept it if they were relocated somewhere else in Spain, then 39% of the managers would not leave the country (Spain) even if that meant losing their jobs (Fig. 4).

³ Interview to PC, AP, MD, SC, and JD 2004.



Fig. 4

Suppose you had to choose between losing your job and keeping it in return for being relocated somewhere else:



Own design on the basis of the 2004 MOD's, Gaggiotti 2004.

Conclusion

The relationship with the place adds a variable of analysis to the study of centrality and hierarchy of work carried out by the MOW Team: the centrality and hierarchy of work cannot be studied independently of a bigger context defined by the companies and the prevailing discourses. In a framework of a strong production delocalization, of a permanent reference of the media and the business circles to the possibility –seen as threatening- of the ‘flight’ of companies, the references about the importance of work for those with managing responsibilities –which is supposed to be, in theory, defining and central for any company- seems to have precise limits: work is important, as long as one can work where one decides to.

This preliminary and non categorical conclusion was partially stressed in the interviews conducted with some of the interviewed managers. It called our attention, for example, the fact that non Spanish managers were more willing to be relocated. In fact, for many of them, our question was almost “out of place”: delocalization rules, one works where one can.

This is the starting point for our next research: To what extent can the delocalization decision be linked to more or less willingness to relocate on the part of the managers? Is it possible that traditionally human resources exporting countries, such as Spain and Latin American countries, show difficulties when carrying out a delocalization of management?

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