



IHRM in Action Case 6.1

A rainy expatriate performance appraisal

Richard Hoffman, a Québécois chemical engineer working for a Canadian-based energy firm, was given a three-year expatriate assignment in Venezuela as a technical liaison and environmental protection project manager. His local project supervisor was Jean, a French engineer who had lived in French Guiana and then Venezuela for over 20 years. Richard thought that, as a Francophone from Quebec, he and Jean would be able to build a quick working relationship. Rich sent Jean an early email (in French, and not the usual corporate English) containing what he thought of as the five most significant goals associated with his assignment – similar to the management-by-objectives section of the more or less standard performance appraisal forms he had filled out for years during earlier assignments in Edmonton, Toronto and at corporate headquarters in Montreal. After several months with no response from Jean, Richard caught Jean in the hallway between meetings and asked him about the email and his progress to date. “Don’t worry about that”, Jean responded blandly. “Just keep working to the deadlines and I will check with your co-workers and the other project managers on your work. Where did you go to engineering school, by the way?”.

Richard waited another six months and was becoming increasingly anxious as the firm’s annual review week approached. He finally caught up with Jean on a rainy Friday in the lobby of the office building as they both waited for their drivers to arrive. When asked about the upcoming performance review, Jean snorted and said, “*C’est tout fini*, it’s all been taken care of. Make an appointment with my assistant, Louisa, next week and we can go over the report we have sent to Montreal”. As Jean stepped gingerly into the rainy Caracas parking lot, Richard thought back to the last few weeks with his team, the sometimes loud disagreements with his fellow project managers, and wondered if it was too late in the day to call his old supervisor in Toronto.

Source: Based on the synthesis of a series of expatriate experiences.

Frequency of appraisal

In practice, formal appraisal is commonly carried out on a yearly basis, and this appears to extend to international performance systems, even though the domestic-oriented literature on this topic recommends an ongoing combination of formal and informal performance appraisal and feedback. For example, the majority of the US companies in the Gregersen *et al.* study referred to above reported annual appraisal practices. It is interesting to note that the US companies using annual appraisal systems were more likely to use standard appraisal forms and hard criteria. In their discussion of this finding, Gregersen *et al.* comment that replicating domestic practices requires less effort in collecting and interpreting the data, and that the preference for following the domestic system might reflect a lack of international experience within the companies in the sample. It is important to note that only 28 per cent of the HR respondents in their study reported having actually been on an international assignment themselves, so it is reasonable to assume that they might not be fully aware of the need to take contextual criteria into consideration, or see a need for the customization of their expatriate performance systems. Limited research suggests that gender differences may also impact preferences in the form and nature of reviews, in some studies even more significantly as do cultural differences.⁶⁰

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