As more and more companies cross the border from a national to an international focus, the need for managers who can operate effectively in a global environment increases. In the course of a day a global manager might have to work with a plant manager in Asia, a supplier in South America, government officials in Africa, and strategic alliance partners in Europe. This presents challenges in communication, collaboration, quickness of action, and mobility that are far different from those faced by managers whose responsibilities are limited to a single country.

This article will look at some of the characteristics that contribute to high performance by global managers and some of the things that organizations can do to recognize and foster those characteristics. But first one must have some insight into the complicated and constantly changing world in which global managers operate. Here’s a look at a hypothetical morning in the life of a global manager.

John Smith is sitting at his desk in New York. The phone rings. It is the Beijing plant manager, who is British, announcing that the factory has been shut down because the workers are demonstrating after the accidental NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Serbia. John accepts this information without comment. He knows the plant manager only slightly and is not sure whether the man is prone to understatement or hysteria. John has always found it hard to read the British.

After telling the plant manager to hold tight and await further instructions, John hangs up and turns to his e-mail. There is a message from a plant manager in Mexico. Inflation remains rampant, and employees are complaining that they don’t make enough to pay their spiraling rent. John is mildly annoyed, thinking that Mexican managers act more like workers’ parents than like supervisors. He responds to the message abruptly, then wonders whether he should have hit the send button.

John leaves his office to go to a meeting and passes the company’s finance director in the hallway. The director tells him that relocation costs for expatriates are out of control. John barely bears him; he still has Beijing on his mind.

John turns back to his office to ask his secretary to arrange a conference call of all plant managers worldwide. The call will take place across twelve time zones. John knows he’ll have to be up at 3 A.M. to participate in the call.

John’s secretary reminds him that he will fly to Mexico on Monday for a five-day stay and then head to England, where he’ll spend a week. She asks John if the conference call should be scheduled to take place before he goes or during his trip. (This year, for the third year in a row, John has acquired more than 100,000 frequent flyer miles. He wonders whether he’ll ever get to use them or if he even wants to.)

John heads back out of his office to go to the meeting, at which he’s scheduled to explain why there have been cost overruns in manufacturing.

What Is a Global Manager?

John Smith is a global manager. He is not an expatriate. He lives in New York and his office is in New York, but he manages across distances, cultures, and countries through the use of the telephone, e-mail, and faxes. He frequently has to travel. Every time John picks up a phone, gets off an airplane, or checks his e-mail, he is faced with a management issue. This is true of any manager, but John must assess and respond to each issue through the ever shifting lenses of distances, countries, and cultures.

Global managers must assess and respond to each management issue through the ever shifting lenses of distances, countries, and cultures.
difficulties of not being able to see the people he works with. When John manages across countries, he must deal with differing laws, political systems, and economies. When he manages across cultures, he must deal with differing expectations about how he should behave; how employees and colleagues should behave; how customers, suppliers, and distributors should behave; and how work should get done. Because John works with plant managers in many countries and each country has a different culture and is a different distance away from his New York office, his job is extremely complex.

The Roles of Global Managers

In a multiyear study of four organizations with headquarters in the United States or Europe, the Center for Creative Leadership asked 214 managers located in thirty countries which roles and capabilities were most important in their jobs. Each organization is in a different industry sector: high-tech manufacturing, services, pharmaceuticals, or vehicle manufacturing. Half the managers have primarily domestic responsibilities and half have global responsibilities.

We asked each manager to rate the importance of seven role behaviors and eight capabilities to being effective in his or her job. Managers with domestic responsibilities rated the role of leader higher in importance to being effective in their jobs than did managers with global responsibilities. Managers with global responsibilities rated the roles of spokesperson and liaison higher in importance to their jobs than did managers with domestic responsibilities. Managers with global responsibilities also rated the capabilities of cultural adaptability, international business knowledge, and time management significantly higher in importance to their jobs than did managers with domestic responsibilities.

The research results indicate that when managers are in the same location as their subordinates—in which case the likelihood is high that the managers and subordinates are members of the same cultural group—the traditional role of leader is perceived as highly important. However, when managers are not in the same location as the people they manage—in which case the likelihood increases that the managers and subordinates are members of different cultural groups—the roles of liaison and spokesperson, along with the ability to be culturally adaptable, the capacity to manage time, and the specialized knowledge needed to conduct business internationally, assume greater importance.

These are the role behaviors and capabilities that managers themselves identify as most important to their jobs, but some additional information emerged when managers were viewed through the eyes of other people in their organizations.

Getting to the Heart of Performance

Which traits, skills, and capabilities are most likely to be associated with high performance ratings for managers with global responsibilities, and are they different from the traits, skills, and capabilities linked to high-performing managers with domestic responsibilities?

A manager brings to his or her job certain personality traits, knowledge, experiences, and skills. We wanted to examine all these factors, so we set out to look at the whole person.

We wanted to find out whether any personality traits, any skill at playing particular managerial roles, and any specific sets of capabilities are more likely to be associated with good performance when a manager’s work is global in scope than when the work is domestic in scope. (We judged performance according to how each manager’s boss and direct reports rated the manager in five areas of performance.)

Personality Traits

Previous research has established two personality traits as being especially important to managerial effectiveness. CCL’s research reached the same conclusions. Managers who are emotionally stable and conscientious—meaning high achieving and dependable—are more likely to receive high performance ratings from their bosses and direct reports than are managers who do not possess these traits. This is true whether the manager’s work is global or domestic. As a sidelight, it is interesting to note that these two personality traits emerged as strongly related to managerial effectiveness even though the managers in the study represented more than thirty nationalities.

The research found no personality trait that is uniquely and directly related to effectiveness for managers with global responsibilities as opposed to those with domestic responsibilities. However, the study did uncover relationships between particular
personality traits and specific skills that may have implications for developing effective global managers. We examine those relationships later in this article.

**Skill in Playing Particular Managerial Roles**

We found that whether managers work in a global or a domestic context, their skill in playing the roles of decision maker, spokesperson, and negotiator has a bearing on performance ratings from bosses and direct reports. The abilities to take action, solve problems, take responsibility, weigh consequences, and resolve issues in the face of risk and uncertainty are key to performance whether the scope of the work is global or domestic. Global managers, however, must adapt how they negotiate, represent the company, and make decisions to each country and culture they deal with.

Also, skill in playing the role of innovator was found to be related to performance ratings only for managers whose jobs are globally complex. Innovators are managers who know when it is critical to see things in new ways, try new approaches, and seize new opportunities. Ronald A. Heifetz, in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, speaks of innovation as a possible outcome when worldviews collide. The work of global managers is by definition caught between opposing worldviews. The ability to meet this challenge through innovation can help determine a global manager’s effectiveness.

**Skill in playing the role of innovator is related to global managers’ performance ratings.**

The ability to cope with pressure is related to performance for all managers, whether global or domestic.

**Flexibility Is Key**

To sum up, managers in international organizations, whether their responsibilities are global or domestic, need to be able to assume the roles of decision maker, spokesperson, leader, and negotiator. Global managers, however, must have the flexibility to play these roles differently when dealing with different cultures and to cope with the associated stress and pressure. Additionally, managers who manifest the traits of emotional stability and conscientiousness are more likely to be rated as high performers.

When a manager’s work shifts to a global scope, he or she needs to be able to play a new role, that of innovator. To be successful the global manager must be able to take the perspective of others and must possess and put to use a specialized knowledge of international business.

For managers making a transition from domestic to global responsibilities, it is perhaps their skill in the role of innovator and their capacity for perspective-taking that largely determine how successful they will be at taking the skills and capacities that were critical in their domestic jobs and adapting and leveraging them in their global jobs.

**Benefiting from the Research**

We believe that the findings of CCL’s research can be applied in organizations by managers in global roles, by managers aspiring to global roles, and by human resource development professionals to design systems that prepare others for global roles. If you apply our findings in your organization, you should evaluate how the research work is playing out in your industry, with the people in your organization, and in different contexts.

How does one acquire the skills and capabilities to be an effective global manager? Traits and experience are central to development of skills and capabilities. Managers learn the skills that allow them to be effective from a host of experiences, including assignments, relationships, and education. It is likely that each person comes into the world able to learn some sets of skills with less work and effort than other sets of skills.

We explored whether any personality traits might be associated with particular skills and whether any cosmopolitan experiences—such as having lived or being educated in a number of countries or having learned more than one language—
might be tied to skills that were found to be uniquely critical to the effectiveness of global managers.

We uncovered some connections between certain personality traits and particular skills, knowledge, and capabilities. Managers who were skilled at playing the role of innovator were more likely to have the traits of openness to change and of extroversion. (Extroversion is what allows them to “sell” the innovative approach.) Managers who were adept at perspective-taking were more likely to have the traits of emotional stability and agreeableness—which includes trust in and consideration for others, candor, and sympathy. Managers with a high degree of international business knowledge were more likely to have the traits of emotional stability and conscientiousness.

Does this mean that people who do not have the traits of agreeableness, openness to change, extroversion, conscientiousness, and emotional stability can never acquire the skills needed to be effective global managers? No; it merely means that managers seeking to acquire new skills or play new roles can benefit from knowing who they are. This self-knowledge prepares them to understand how difficult it will be to acquire a skill or play a new role, and it helps them map a learning strategy.

We also found connections between cosmopolitan experiences and the skills and capabilities unique to global managers. Managers with international business knowledge were more likely to have the skill of cultural adaptability and to be able to take the perspective of others. They were more likely to speak multiple languages, to be widely traveled, and to have lived in a number of countries. We also found that global managers who had extensive experience interacting with diversity in their previous domestic work experience had higher levels of international business knowledge.

The links between these cosmopolitan experiences and the skills and capabilities critical to being an effective global manager have implications for executive development. Organizations could gain a competitive advantage by identifying their most likely future global executives early in their careers; providing them with language training, expatriate opportunities, and the chance to serve on or manage virtual and cross-cultural project teams; and sending them on international business trips.

Disagreement on a Global Scale

One interesting finding from CCL’s research was that global managers’ performance ratings from their bosses often conflicted with the performance ratings from their direct reports, whereas the level of agreement between bosses’ and direct reports’ ratings of domestic managers was similar to that found in most multi-rater exercises.

The inconsistency in the ratings of the global managers was likely rooted in the fact that most of the direct reports were not in the same country or from the same culture as the managers. It underscores the dilemma of global managers: their direct reports are scattered around the globe, hold a wide range of cultural expectations about how the managers should behave, and work in different business contexts. It also underscores the qualities that are core to the effectiveness of global managers: cultural adaptability, the ability to see the world through others’ eyes, innovativeness in the midst of opposing worldviews, and a thorough understanding of doing business internationally.

CCL’s research found a paradoxical dark side for managers who are perceived by their bosses as being cosmopolitan. Being multilingual, being widely traveled, and having lived in a variety of cultures are critical factors in developing the skills needed to be an effective global manager, but managers who fit a highly cosmopolitan profile are rated low on how well liked and trusted they are by their colleagues.

These same factors are associated with negative ratings from bosses in one area of interpersonal relationships. Managers who fit this highly cosmopolitan profile are rated low by their bosses on how well liked and trusted they are by their peers and other colleagues in their organizations.

We were initially puzzled by these findings but found a possible explanation in a 1983 article by
Indrei Raitu, “Thinking Internationally: A Comparison of How International Executives Learn.” The author notes that internationalists are seen as being extremely effective but also as “chameleonlike,” in a negative sense. So the very experiences that help global managers learn to be flexible and innovative may also contribute to their being disliked and mistrusted by other people in their organizations. Understanding and adapting to this phenomenon is just one more challenge for the global manager.

SUGGESTED READING


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