Developing cross-cultural competencies through international corporate volunteerism

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ABSTRACT

We propose three features of cross-cultural experiences, *contextual novelty*, *project meaningfulness* and *social support*, facilitate the development of cross-cultural competencies. Using a longitudinal design, the employees in Study 1 participated in an international corporate volunteerism program designed with all three features. These results found a positive change over time in cross-cultural competencies. Results of Study 2, also longitudinal, suggest that the participants' post-assignment cross-cultural competencies are the highest: (1) when employees with higher baseline cross-cultural competencies work in high contextual novelty (i.e., international location) and (2) when employees with lower baseline cross-cultural competencies work in low contextual novelty (i.e., domestic location).

1. Introduction

Understanding how cross-cultural competencies can be developed is an important issue for organizations – and has been an important issue since the era of globalization began in the 1990s (Bird & Mendenhall, 2016). For nearly 30 years, companies have flagged the need for more leaders who could "thrive in a world that reflected this new reality of real-time, multiple spanning of technological, financial, cultural, organizational, stakeholder, and political boundaries" (Bird & Mendenhall, 2016, p. 4). The lack of culturally competent professionals continues to negatively affect the competitiveness and growth of multinational corporations (MNCs); roughly 30% of US-based companies have been unable to exploit global business opportunities due to lack if global capabilities of leaders (Ghemawat, 2012) and one-third of global CEOs reported canceling global strategic initiatives due to talent-related concerns including the need for agile leaders (PWC, 2012).

Like CEOs, Human Resource (HR) managers recognize this need to develop leaders' cross-cultural competencies. When surveyed, over 700 global chief human resource officers (CHROs) named this as their most important HR deliverable for their MNCs' future global competitiveness, stating that HR's "…ability to identify, develop and empower effective, agile leaders is a critical imperative for CHROs…" (IBM Corporation, 2010, p. 4). It is not only the senior organizational leaders who recognize the need for cross-cultural competencies; professionals, irrespective of nationality, recognize the same deficit in themselves. When over 13,000 professionals from 48 countries in 32 industries self-rated their effectiveness on twelve managerial tasks, the three tasks with the lowest ratings were the only three on the list with an intercultural component (i.e., integrating oneself into foreign environments, intercultural communication, and leading across countries and cultures; DDI and The Conference Board, 2015). Similarly, the Economist Intelligence Unit surveyed business leaders from 68 countries and found that 90% of them reported that "cross-cultural management" is their top challenge when working across borders.

Both academic and practitioners agree there is a need to effectively develop cross-cultural competencies. They also agree that the primary way to develop cross-cultural competencies is through international assignments (Adler, 1975; Herman & Zaccaro, 2014; Osland, 1995). While it makes intuitive sense that an international or expatriate assignment has the *potential* to be a developmental experience, we can also recognize that merely breathing the air of another country is not the feature that makes the experience developmental. The *quality* of a given cross-cultural experience matters in the development of cross-cultural competencies. To date, however, there are few studies

examining the features of a cross-cultural experience which influence how the development of cross-cultural competencies occurs (see Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012; Dragoni et al., 2014 for exceptions). Thus, using a longitudinal design to examine change over time, our goal is to extend the literature on how cross-cultural competencies are developed, focusing on three key features of experiences: contextual novelty, project meaningfulness and social support.

We test our hypotheses with two samples of employees who participated in international corporate volunteerism (ICV) programs. International corporate volunteerism programs are being recognized as cost-effective ways to develop employees by providing opportunities for intensive cultural experiences (Caligiuri, Mencin, & Jiang, 2013; Jones, 2016; Marquis & Kanter, 2010; Pless, Maak, & Stahl, 2011). Multinational companies, such as Dow, IBM, Cigna and PepsiCo, have started using corporate volunteerism assignments to achieve the firms' corporate social responsibility goals with the hope of also developing employees' cross-cultural competencies. Domestic and international corporate volunteerism programs send high-skill employees to host countries as "on loan" pro bono advisors for non-profit organizations. Corporate volunteerism assignments are short-term experiences, usually lasting between a few weeks and 6 months. The participants provide short term, project-based technical expertise for projects identified by the non-profit partner organization, the goals and deliverables of which are aimed at capacity-building for the partner organization.

There is some preliminary, post-hoc evidence that cross-cultural competency development occurs through international corporate volunteerism (ICV) programs. In a post hoc assessment, employee volunteers who had participated in IBM's program reported that they had increased their appreciation for global differences and had learned new skills because of the experience (Marquis & Kanter, 2010). Another post hoc evaluation of the PriceWaterhouseCoopers' ICV program found that volunteer assignments gave employees "exposure to adverse situations, forcing participants out of their comfort zones, confronting them with cultural and ethical paradoxes, and motivating them to change their perspectives on life and business" (Pless et al., 2011, p. 252). Employees volunteers from PWC's volunteerism program self-reported feeling as though they had an increased ability to handle ambiguity and a better ability to work effectively with culturally different stakeholders after the volunteer experience (Pless et al., 2011).

A longitudinal stakeholder study of GlaxoSmithKline's ICV program found that managers rated the participants in an international corporate volunteerism experience as having gained capabilities that were applied to their regular jobs upon return (Caligiuri et al., 2013). These analyses shed light on what is likely occurring but have not directly tested the change in cross-cultural competencies as a function of the ICV program using a longitudinal design. Doing so was a goal of the present study in addition to testing the properties of experiences that help develop cross-cultural competencies.

In the remainder of this paper, we will first review the literature on cross-cultural competencies, highlighting their mutability. We then hypothesize how three features of a cross-cultural experience may facilitate the development of cross-cultural companies. We test our hypotheses in two longitudinal studies of the ICV participants' change over time in cross-cultural competencies.

1.1. Cross-cultural competencies

Many researchers conclude that cross-culturally competent individuals can effectively manage themselves, their relationships, and their business demands while in an unfamiliar cultural context. Over the past three decades, researchers have identified a domain of over 160 cross-cultural competencies (Bird et al., 2013) related to international and global work success (see, for example, Moran & Harris, 1987; Srinivas, 1995; Rhinesmith, 1996; Jordan & Cartwright, 1998; Bird, Osland, & Lane, 2004; Jokinen, 2005; Osland, 2013; Bird et al., 2013).

With so many cross-cultural competencies in the academic literature, many with conceptual overlap, a full review of cross-cultural competencies is beyond the scope of this paper. It is useful, nonetheless, to consider the categorization into sub-domains to better understand what many researchers consider to be within the construct domain of cross-cultural competence. For example, Jokinen (2005) identifies three sub-domains of global leadership competencies, including those fundamental to development of other competencies (e.g., self-awareness, inquisitiveness), those related to the desired mental characteristics of global leaders (e.g., optimism, empathy, cognitive skills, social judgment), and more explicit skills or tangible knowledge (e.g., social skills and networking skills). Bird, Mendenhall, Stevens, and Oddou (2010) suggest global leadership competencies sort into three sub-domains: perception management (e.g., tolerance of ambiguity and inquisitiveness), relationship management (e.g., interpersonal engagement and social flexibility), and self-management (e.g., self-confidence and self-identity). Caligiuri and Tarique's (2012) suggests a three-part classification of sub-domains, similar to Bird et al., with the categories of self-management (e.g., tolerance of ambiguity and resilience), relationship-management (e.g., perspective-taking and humility), and business-management (e.g., adapting approaches, integrating perspectives).

At this stage, the nomological net of individuals' cross-cultural competencies is, metaphorically, like that of individuals' overall health; there are many facets, some within a person's control to improve, and all important at some level. Individuals' cross-cultural competencies facilitate individuals' personal adjustment in novel contexts, accelerate interpersonal relationships with diverse people, and enable the effective completion of tasks in a novel environment (e.g., Bird et al., 2010, 2013; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012; Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1999; Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006).

Cross-cultural competencies have predicted success in a variety of international and multicultural contexts. For example, Lloyd and Härtel (2010) found that culturally-diverse work teams were perceived to be more effective when team members possess competencies such as cognitive complexity, openness, tolerance for ambiguity, among others. In an expatriate context, Shaffer et al. (2006) found that the cross-cultural competencies such as cultural flexibility and low ethnocentrism predicted expatriate assignment outcomes such as retention and job performance. In a study of global leaders, the cross-cultural competencies of tolerance of ambiguity, cultural flexibility and low ethnocentrism predicted supervisor ratings of success (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012). While construct clarity remains complex, cross-cultural competencies, in general, seem to predict professional success for individuals who work in different countries and work with people from diverse cultures.

1.2. Developing cross-cultural competencies

Research suggests that cross-cultural competencies are dynamic and, as such, can be acquired or enhanced through cross-cultural experiences (Bird et al., 2010; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012; Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1999; Shaffer et al., 2006). International work experiences are generally seen to be instrumental in cross-cultural competency development because they are more likely to have the developmental features such as variety and affective intensity (Bird & Oddou, 2013) and enable individuals to engage in developmental activities such as asking for feedback, learning new behavioral norms, understanding unfamiliar situations, and the like (Gregersen, Morrison, & Black, 1998) and have been called the "most powerful experience in shaping the perspective and capabilities of effective global leaders" (Black, Gregersen, Mendenhall, & Stroh, 1999, p. 2).

While cross-cultural experience in the development of cross-cultural competencies makes intuitive sense, few studies have examined the features or boundary conditions of those experiences which make the experiences developmental (see Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012 and Dragoni et al., 2014 for two exceptions) and none, to our knowledge, examine
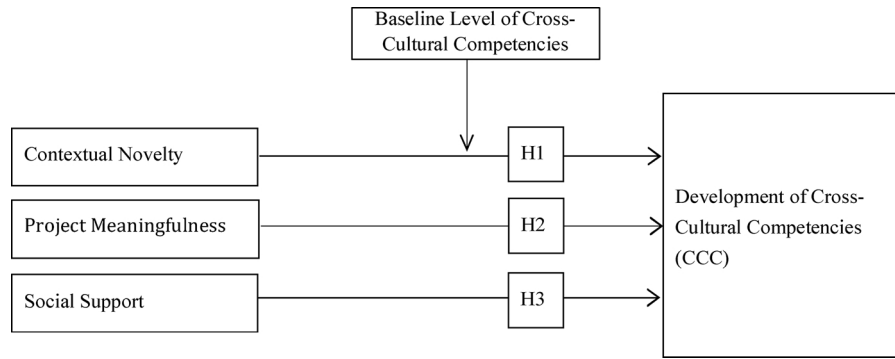
Fig. 1. Developing Cross-Cultural Competencies.

change over time in cross-cultural competencies. In a cross-sectional study of over 400 global leaders, Caligiuri and Tarique (2012) found that organization-initiated and self-initiated cross-cultural experiences that have a significant level of contact with host national peers are positively related to the development of cross-cultural competencies. While not longitudinal, this study suggests that social learning seems to be relevant for cross-cultural competency development. In another cross-sectional study of senior global leaders, Dragoni et al. (2014) found that global leaders developed their strategic thinking competency when they had exposure to a more culturally-distant countries. In this case, working in a culturally distant or novel context is developmental. Combined, these two studies suggest that some, but not all, global work experiences are developmental.

To extend this literature, the present study proposes three features of experiential opportunities to develop cross-cultural competencies and tests them in a set of longitudinal studies with participants of international corporate volunteerism programs. We propose the three features of experiential opportunities that are likely to encourage employees' engagement in developmental behaviors are *contextual novelty, project meaningfulness,* and *social learning* (see Figure 1). Each will be discussed in greater detail below (Table 1).

1.2.1. The role of contextual novelty

Situational novelty is an important feature for an experience to be developmental (McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994; Ohlott, 2004). In the case of the developing cross-cultural competencies, it is the unfamiliar cultural environment, rather than the newness of the technical task, that provides the novelty (Dragoni et al., 2014). This *contextual novelty* is present in situations where an understanding of the host national or cross-cultural environment is critical for success (Dragoni et al., 2014). In an international context, individuals are likely to have a wide range of novel experiences as they adjust to a culturally different workplace, manage paradoxes, encounter a new physical environment, and handle the demands created by interacting with host

nationals in a different organizational culture (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; Bird & Oddou, 2013; Osland, 2000).

Contextual novelty facilitates development of cross-cultural competencies because it requires individuals to manage a greater number of contrasts that, in turn, create new, more complex cognitive structures, more nuanced behavioral responses and more advanced professional competencies (Black & Gregersen, 1991; Dragoni et al., 2014; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2002; Lord & Hall, 2005). Contextual novelty also comes with higher risk of failure, which fosters self-aware individuals, sensing their limited effectiveness, to seek advice, and receive feedback within the new environment (McCauley, Eastman, & Ohlott, 1995; Oddou & Mendenhall, 2013; Zaccaro & Banks, 2004; Ohlott, 2004). By reaching out to host nationals and others who understand the cultural environments, they gain new skills and build cross-cultural competencies.

In the context of developing cross-cultural competencies, the question is whether all individuals benefit equally from contextually novel situations. Following from the research in leadership development, too much novelty may be overwhelming for some individuals (Day & Dragoni, 2015; DeRue & Wellman, 2009) and, if too extreme, might cause stress which limits one's ability to develop (Salehi, Cordero, & Sandi, 2010). Bird and Oddou (2013) suggest that with respect to the cultural novelty of the environment, "Managers may be given the right kind of experiences but find they are unable to handle them or learn from them because the challenges are overwhelming" (p. 102). Some individuals handle and grow from their contextually novel experiences, others, however, may not. It is important to understand whether the relationship between contextual novelty and individuals' ability to handle that novelty will interact to influence the subsequent development of cross-cultural competencies.

Individuals utilize cognitive resources when experiencing novel or challenging situations (Fiedler & Garcia, 1987; Sweller, 1988, 1994), leaving those who are overly-depleted with less mental energy for developmental activities, such as asking for feedback and support, learning a new language and new behavioral norms, personal reflection

Table 1
Summary of the Features of Developmental Experiences for Building Cross-Cultural Competencies.

Feature of the Developmental Experience	How the Feature Fosters the Development of Cross-Cultural Competencies
Contextual Novelty	• Ask more questions because the context is unfamiliar • Gather information about the context before the experience begins • Seek a mentor or cultural coach to help with interpretation • Have greater humility about the role of the environment that is difficult to interpret
Project Meaningfulness	• Willing to try new ways of working because of the desire to help the cause • Learn more about the context because of the positive affiliation with the cause • Spend more time learning new skills to contribute more to the project
Social Support	• Receive feedback on appropriate cultural behaviors • Receive information about the environment from those who know it well • Receive instrumental support on tangible things in the environment • Receive emotional support, providing psychological safety to make mistakes and ask questions

and the like. For some individuals, the novelty of the host country might be too great for development to occur because the situation is too mentally demanding (Scott, 1966). The opposite might also be true; in some cases, the context might not provide enough novelty to engage in the activities which foster the development of cross-cultural competencies. Carette, Anseel, and Lievens (2013) found that challenging assignments had a positive influence on subsequent performance of mid-career employees but that the relationship, over time, exhibited diminishing returns. While providing high quality stretch assignments are a best practice for accelerating employee development (Ohlott, 2004; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998), the level of perceived stretch in terms of contextual novelty for any given experience might vary across individuals.

Volunteerism assignments are particularly rich context in which to assess the role of contextual novelty because they possess multiple features of novelty; the context of the non-profit is different from one's corporate environment and, if international, the host country is different from one's home country (Caligiuri et al., 2013; Pless et al., 2011). For some, the contextual novelty of the host country's culture combined with the contextual novelty of the NGO's culture might make these experiences too challenging for those who begin from a low level of cross-cultural competencies. For individuals with lower levels of baseline cross-cultural competencies, serving in a domestic volunteerism assignment might be the better fit, providing the contextual novelty from working in the non-profit organization, without the additional challenge of the host country's culture. On the other extreme, individuals who have higher levels of cross-cultural competencies before the assignment might not find the domestic volunteerism assignment to be enough of a stretch to foster development. Collectively, we believe the positive relationship between contextual novelty and cross-cultural competency development is likely moderated by an individuals' baseline cross-cultural competencies. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. The relationship between the contextual novelty of the volunteer assignment and the post-assignment cross-cultural competencies is moderated by baseline cross-cultural competencies such that employees with low baseline cross-cultural competencies develop more from volunteer assignments lower in contextual novelty (domestic) and individuals with high baseline cross-cultural competencies develop more from assignments higher contextual novelty (international).

1.2.2. The role of project meaningfulness

Meaningfulness describes the amount of significance an individual's work holds (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Projects requiring individuals to bring about change or build relationships tend to be associated with the most meaningful work (Day, 2001). Meaningful work has a variety of talent-related benefits, such as greater levels of job satisfaction, engagement, and performance and lower levels of stress and burnout (e.g. King & Napa, 1998; Mottaz, 1985; Grant & Campbell, 2007). Project meaningfulness is also a key feature of developmental experiences at it fosters developmental behaviors such as a willingness to try new approaches, to learn more about the context, and to gain new skills in order to help the project succeed (Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Davies & Easterby-Smith, 1984; McCauley et al., 1994). Investigating the critical career experiences of successful executives, Davies and Easterby-Smith (1984) found that although executives could recall many developmental experiences throughout their career, the most important were those deemed to be highly meaningful. In the global leadership development context, Osland and colleagues suggest that developmental cross-cultural experiences are meaningful when they provide complexity, intensity, emotional affect, and relevance (Osland & Bird, 2013; Osland, Bird, Mendenhall, & Osland, 2006). For an experience to be considered a developmental or "crucible" experience (Bennis & Thomas, 2002), the challenge must be meaningful.

Within the corporate volunteerism context, a project is likely to be viewed as more meaningful if the volunteer perceived that their efforts are making long-term sustainable contributions to the overall mission of their partner non-profit organization or NGO (Hall & Chandler, 2005). When volunteers perceive their work to be more meaningful and they will work harder as they "attend to, absorb and interpret information about the task and the broader social context" (Bartel, Saavedra, & Van Dyne, 2001, p. 269). This greater effort can foster development as volunteers who believe their contributions will positively impact the success of the NGO become more motivated to learn about the context and broaden their skill in order to contribute effectively. Thus, we believe that volunteer assignments higher in perceived project meaningfulness will result in greater developmental benefits for the volunteer.

Hypothesis 2. Employees in volunteer assignments that are higher in project meaningfulness will have higher ratings of post-assignment cross-cultural competencies.

1.2.3. The role of social support

Another important characteristic of highly developmental experiences is the provision of a socially supportive learning environment. Albrecht and Adelman (1987:19) define social support as the "communication between recipients and providers that reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience." Social support helps individuals mobilize psychological resources and serves to provide positive feelings of reinforcement, recognition and affirmation (Fontaine, 1986; Rook, 1984). In the context of cross-cultural work, social support can reduce uncertainty and increase the perception of control over one's environment (Adelman, 1988), buffer acculturation stress, provide emotional support and boost confidence in the cross-cultural environment (Aycan, 1997; Black, 1990; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002).

In a socially supportive learning environment, social interaction increases learning, such that social support received from others provides resources for the individual to continue learning (Bandura, 1977). This supportive environment fosters learning because individuals feel professionally or emotionally safe to practice new things with support from coworker and supervisors (Edmonson, 1999). Inherent in learning, a shared, supportive, and trust-building context is more likely to foster the transfer of knowledge from peers and the environment to the individual (Andrews & Delahaye, 2000). Research has demonstrated that social support is a particularly important component for handling the challenges of and learning from an international assignment or experience (Adelman, 1988; Aycan, 1997; Black, 1990; Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Church, 1982; Feldman & Bolino, 1999).

Social support can affect cross-cultural competency development during cross-cultural experiences. Birdi, Allan, and Warr (1997) found that developmental experiences require social support in a psychologically safe environment, one in which an individual may receive feedback and make mistakes without fear of rejection from group members. A shared, supportive, and trust-building context is more likely to foster the transfer of knowledge from peers and the environment to the individual (Andrews & Delahaye, 2000; Caligiuri, Baytalskaya, & Lazarova, 2016). Caligiuri and Tarique (2012) hypothesized that the relationship between interactions with host nationals and subsequent development of cross-cultural competencies was a function of the social learning in the cross-cultural context. Taken together, an environment which provides a greater level of social support should provide a higher level of developmental benefit for building cross-cultural competencies. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3. Employees in volunteer assignments that are higher in social support will have higher ratings of post-assignment cross-cultural competencies (Fig. 1).

2. Study 1

As a preliminary test of whether participation in an international corporative volunteerism program affects the development of cross-cultural competencies, we collected a longitudinal study with an ICV program designed to include all three features of the proposed model. The ICV projects had a high level of *contextual novelty* as the participants were from an American Fortune 100 insurance company and the projects were in either Indonesia or Thailand.

The participants had a comparably high level of baseline cross-cultural competencies.

The ICV projects had high levels of *project meaningfulness*. Those who served in

Denpasar, Indonesia worked with one of two NGOs: The East Bali Poverty Project and the

R.O.L.E. Foundation. The East Bali Poverty Project works to help schools teach children about hygiene, health, and agriculture. The R.O.L.E Foundation (Rivers, Oceans, Lands, Ecology) works to promote sustainability in agriculture and women's education and business development. In Thailand, the ICV participants partnered with three local NGOs: Childline Thailand, Brighter Thailand Foundation, and Baan Nokkamin Foundation. Childline Thailand provides health, education, legal, and housing services to the homeless and neglected adolescents of Thailand. The Brighter Thailand Foundation aims to further personal development, leadership qualities, and civic engagement among the young people of Thailand. The Baan Nokkamin Foundation provides assistance to homeless children, orphans, and children who have possibly been affected by drug use. The ICV participants' projects, all vetted by the National Peace Corps Association, were diverse but each leveraged the participants' technical and professional skills.

The program was designed to have a high level of *social support*. Each team had an embedded Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (RPCV) who knew the language and the culture. In addition, the NGO leaders and staff members spent significant time with the ICV participants while they were in-country. The participants and the NGO leaders and staff members continued to collaborate virtually for up to six months after the participants left the country.

2.1. Participants

The participating firm included the international corporate volunteerism program into a two-week visit to a developing country as part of a leadership development program. Their ICV program included both in-country and virtual work with their NGO partner upon return to the United States. Twenty-nine participants, all located in the United States, participated in this program. Eight employees participated in the ICV program in 2015 in Indonesia, 11 participated in 2016 in Thailand and 10 participated in Thailand in 2017. The three cohorts, 2015, 2016, and 2017 showed no significant differences in scores in the pre-test, were combined to give the study more statistical power. There were no significant differences between the male (n = 19) and female (n = 10) participants in either the pretest or posttest scores.

2.2. Procedures

Data collection involved survey responses from employee volunteers at two points in time: Time 1 was prior to the start of the volunteer assignment. Time 2 was 3.5 months after the completion of the assignment.

2.3. Measure

At both points in time (before and 3.5 months after the employees returned to their business units), online surveys were sent to employees asking them to self-assess their cross-cultural competencies. We utilized the cross-cultural competency assessment from the Cultural Agility Self-Assessment (CASA; TASCA Global, 2017). The 50-item self-assessment uses 6-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree through 6 = strongly agree) to assess cross-cultural competencies. Sample items include "I enjoy eating at ethnic restaurants - especially those I have never tried before" and "It is easy for me to understand another person's perspective in a discussion". Cronbach's α for the 50-item scale is .75. The average is calculated to create an overall score of cross-cultural competencies, where 6 would be the highest level of cross-cultural competencies and 1 would be the lowest. For time 1 and time 2, the mean and SD are 4.22 (SD = .34) and 4.44 (SD = .46) respectively.

2.4. Results from study 1

We tested Hypothesis 1 using a repeated measures ANOVA. The results suggest the post-assignment cross-cultural competencies were significantly higher than their pre-departure cross-cultural competencies (F = 10.92, p < .01).

3. Study 2

To test the specific features of the developmental opportunity for building cross-cultural competencies, we conducted a longitudinal study with variance on each of the three key features of development proposed in our model. Study 2 was conducted within a single European-based pharmaceutical firm with a corporate volunteerism program championed by the firm's CEO. The participating firm deploys high-skilled employee volunteers to both domestic and international locations for volunteer assignments ranging between three and six months. Unlike the program in Study 1, employees serve alone (as opposed to teams) and can apply to participate (as opposed to participating as required experience within a leadership development program). For this study, the organization collected data from the volunteers and their managers before the volunteer assignment and six months after their assignments ended. These data were gathered as a part of the company's program evaluation for its corporate volunteerism initiative.

3.1. Participants

This corporate volunteerism program is open to all interested employees who have been with the company for at least three years, have sponsorship from their line managers, and have made it through the selection process. The selection process includes written essays, psychological assessments, and an interview. Successful candidates are moved to the final matching stage. In this final stage, successful applicants' skills and experiences are matched with the projects that the NGOs have requested. Over half of the successful candidates are matched with a project.

In 2013 and 2014, the company placed 176 employees in 38 countries working with 52 non-profit organizations or NGOs. There were 146 employees responding in the pre-test (83% response rate) and 58 responding in the post-test (33% response rate) six months after the return from the volunteer assignment. Matched to the initially responding group, 92 managers completed the survey in the pre-test (63% response rate) and 45 managers completed the survey in the post-test (31% response rate). Based on the different number of respondents, the sample size changes for the two types of analyses: In the analyses of self-rated cross-cultural competencies, we have full data (both time 1 and time 2) from 58 employees, 21 on domestic assignments and 37 on international assignments. In the analyses of managerial-rated change in cross-cultural competencies we have full data (both time 1 and time 2) from 45 managers who provided ratings for 18 employees on domestic assignments and 27 employees on international assignments.

The employees participating in the program are nationals from 41 countries: 26% of volunteers are from the USA or Canada, 23% from the UK, 14% from other European countries, not including the UK, 24%

from Asia and the Asian-Pacific, 5% from Africa, and 7% from

Central and South America. Employees used their professional skills to work on NGO projects: 24% worked in project management (planning and organizing small and large projects), 19% in business development and change management (operational evaluation and improvement), 13% in sales and/or marketing (promoting products/ services, securing customers and raising money), 11% in communications (media, messaging publicity and branding), 10% in logistics and supply chain management (movement and storage of materials), 9% in research and development (discovering and implementing knowledge, medical or pharmaceutical expertise including lab-based science expertise), 7% in data management and knowledge transfer (enhancing data value and distribution), 2% in information technology (networking and infrastructure), 2% in human resources (organization and people development, policy and procedure), and 1% in financial management (planning and organizing monetary resources). Sixty-four percent of the participants were female.

The volunteer assignments require the employees to leave their current organizational role for either a 3-month or a 6-month period, with the average assignment lasting 5.4 months. Seventy percent of the volunteers were assigned internationally. Among these volunteers, 8% were assigned to work in the USA or Canada, 56% in Africa, 2% in the UK, 14% in Asia, 6% in European countries not including the UK, and 11% in Central and South America.

3.2. Procedures

Data collection involved survey responses from the line managers of employee volunteers and the employee volunteers at two points in time: Time 1 was prior to the start of the volunteer assignment. Time 2 was between three and six months after the completion of the assignment.[1]

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Pre-test and post-test of cross-cultural competencies – manager-ratings

At both points in time (before and six months after the volunteers returned to their business units), online surveys were sent directly to the employees' line managers asking them to assess employees' cross-cultural competencies. We utilized the Cultural Agility Selection Test - Short Form (CAST-SF; TASCA Global, 2017). Each of the 9 items in CAST-SF has a competency definition and asks the manager to rate their overall impression of the employee on that dimension. A sample item is as follows: Tolerance for ambiguity is the internal meter people have that suppresses (or triggers) anxiety or stress as a function of perceived uncertainty (e.g., times when instructions are not well defined, or situations are not clear). People who are tolerant of ambiguity are comfortable in settings where full clarity is not present or possible. For such individuals, ambiguous situations do not produce anxiety or stress. Overall, how would you rate this associate's tolerance of ambiguity?

The scale contained 9 items and used a 5-point scale (1=below expectations through 5 = role model). The pre-test and post-test both have acceptable internal consistency, α = .90 and α = .87.

The average of the 9 items was created and mean and SD are 3.45 (SD = .59) and 3.50 (SD = .56) respectively.

3.3.2. Pre-test and post-test – self-ratings

At both points in time (before and six months after the volunteers

returned to their business units), online surveys were sent to employees asking them to self-assess their cross-cultural competencies. We utilized the Cultural Agility Self-

Assessment - Short Form (CASA-SF; TASCA Global, 2017). Identical to the supervisor ratings, the self-rating scale contained 9 items and asked employees to self-rate their cross-cultural competencies. The survey utilized a 4-point scale (1=my developmental opportunity through 4 = exceptional). The pre-test and post-test both have acceptable internal consistency, α = .68 and α = .70, respectively. The average of the 9 items was created and means are 2.85 (SD = .38) and

3.4. (SD = .38) respectively

3.4.1. Contextual novelty

The location of the employees' volunteer assignment with respect to whether the volunteerism assignment was in the participants' home country or in an international location. This variable is coded 0 = domestic assignment (lower contextual novelty) or 1 = international assignment (higher contextual novelty).

3.4.2. Project meaningfulness

Two items measure project meaningfulness. The items are: "The scope of my assignment has delivered or will deliver a sustainable difference to my NGO," "I have had a positive impact on the skills of those I have worked with." These items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale with anchors of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). High scores represent greater perceived meaningfulness. The mean is 4.34 (SD = .69) and α = .67.

3.4.3. Social support

Two items measure social support. The items are: "My assignment has/had the full support and buy-in from key staff members in my NGO" and "I feel/felt supported by my NGO line manager." These items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale with anchors of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). High scores represent greater social support. The mean is 4.24 (SD = .90) and α = .75.

3.5. Results from study 2

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, sample sizes, and bivariate correlations of all independent, and dependent variables included in these analyses. We used hierarchical linear regression analyses to test our hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 was tested by regressing both self and managers' ratings of post-assignment cross-cultural competencies on contextual novelty (whether this was an international assignment dummy coded) and the interaction of baseline cross-cultural competencies × contextual novelty, project meaningfulness, and social support after controlling for baseline cross-cultural competencies. As shown in Tables 3 and 4, the interaction coefficient between contextual novelty × baseline cross-cultural competencies is a significant predictor for both self-ratings ($B = 3.86$, $p < .001$) and managers' ratings ($B = 4.97$, $p < .001$) of post-assignment cross-cultural competencies. These results provide support for Hypothesis 1. Neither Hypothesis 2 (project meaningfulness) nor Hypothesis 3 (social support) was supported.

As presented in Figs. 2 and 3, the interaction demonstrates that both employees and managers rate post-assignment cross-cultural competencies highest when employees with high baseline cross-cultural competencies worked in an international volunteerism assignment. The lowest ratings were given those with low baseline cross-cultural competencies who served internationally.

4. Discussion

As with other areas within the field of international business, our study suggests that the context matters (Teagarden, Von Glinow, &

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[1] The decision to collect data six months after the completion of the assignment was a practical one. The participating company selected 6 months as the appropriate time to follow-up after consulting with their internal corporate stakeholders on the most realistic, powerful and pragmatic time-frame for the follow-up.

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviation, Sample Sizes, and Correlation Coefficients.[a].

	Mean	SD	N	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Baseline Self-rated CCC	2.85	.38	146						
2. Post-departure Self-rated CCC	3.00	.38	75	.45[**]					
3. Baseline Manager-rated CCC	3.45	.59	109	.11	.04				
4. Post-departure Manager-rated CCC	3.50	.56	56	−.09	−.19	.71[**]			
5. Contextual Novelty/ International (dummy)			114	.22[*]	.26[*]	−.09	−.13		
6. Project Meaningfulness	4.34	.69	114	.11	.20	−.02	−.30	−.04	
7. Social Support	4.24	.90	114	−.08	.05	−.29[*]	-.35[*]	−.09	.49[**]

Note.
[a] Correlation coefficients were calculated pairwise.
* $p < .05$ (1-tailed).
** $p < .01$ (1-tailed).

Table 3
Hierarchical Linear Regression Results Predicting Self-Ratings of Cross-Cultural Competencies (CCC).

	Post-Assignment Self-Rated Cross-Cultural Competencies		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Baseline Self-Rated CCC	−.18	−.017	−.27
Contextual Novelty (Internat'l Dummy)	−3.49[***]	−3.35[***]	−3.87[***]
Baseline CCC × International	3.86[***]	3.72[***]	4.26[***]
Project Meaningfulness		.80	.17
Social Support			−0.19
R^2	.42	.43	.45
Adjusted R^2	.39	.38	.39
F	13.06[***]	8.98[***]	7.69[***]

Note. Standardized regression coefficients were reported in this table.
[*]$p < .05$ (1-tailed).
[**]$p < .01$ (1-tailed).
*** $p < .001$ (1-tailed).

Table 4
Hierarchical Linear Regression Results Predicting Managers' Ratings of Cross-Cultural Competencies (CCC).

	Post-Assignment Manager-Rated Cross-Cultural Competencies		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Baseline Self-Rated CCC	−.45	.24	.26
Contextual Novelty (Internat'l Dummy)	−4.99[***]	−1.72	−1.58
Baseline CCC × International	4.97[***]	1.68	1.52
Project Meaningfulness		−.76	−.04
Social Support			−0.10
R^2	.69	.59	.59
Adjusted R^2	.66	.53	.32
F	28.44[***]	10.96[***]	8.71[***]

Note. Standardized regression coefficients were reported in this table.
[*]$p < .05$ (1-tailed).
[**]$p < .01$ (1-tailed).
*** $p < .001$ (1-tailed).

Fig. 2. Self-Ratings of Post-Assignment Cross-Cultural Competencies.
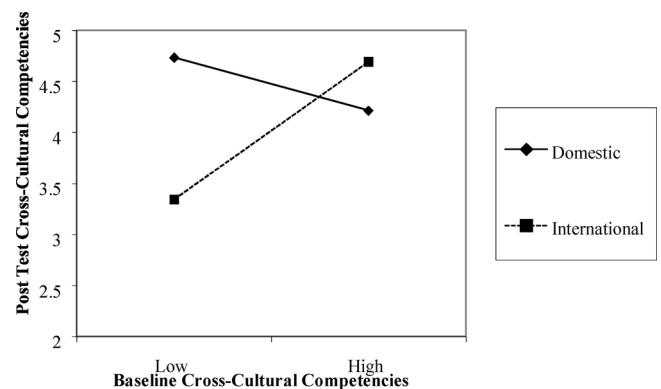
Fig. 3. Manager-Ratings of Post-Assignment Cross-Cultural Competencies.

Mellahi, 2018) in the development of cross-cultural competencies. We test three contextual features of the ICV experience and, in Study 1, find that they are collectively important. However, when we parse each feature's unique influence in Study 2, we find that only contextual novelty facilitated the development of cross-cultural competencies among participants of ICV programs. Neither project meaningfulness nor social support had a unique effect. Given the nascent state of the research examining how cross-cultural competencies are developed during ICV programs, we encourage construct refinement (as discussed
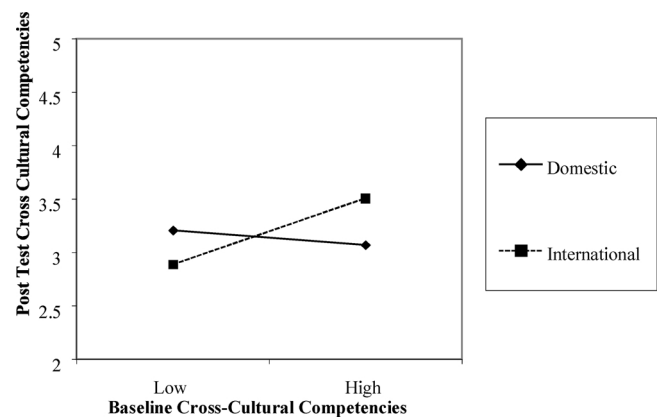
in the limitations section) before concluding that the project meaningfulness and social support are unimportant for development in the ICV context.

The contextual novelty finding extends the literature on expatriate assignments as developmental experiences (Osland, 1995, 2000). ICV experiences, despite their short duration compared to typical expatriate assignments, possess the features that make the experience developmental. Like expatriates, in these culturally novel settings, ICV participants need to recognize the limits of their knowledge of the context, engage in more feedback seeking, and learn how to be effective. Thus, it is likely the contextual features of the experience, rather than duration, that are important in developing cross-cultural competencies.

Given our longitudinal design, we added to the literature on domestic service-learning experiences as developmental opportunities (Bartel et al., 2001; Giles & Eyler, 1994). As with service-learning, ICV participants' desire to help their NGOs likely fostered their information

gathering, encouraged them to understand perspectives for the sake of creating sustainable solutions, and a willingness to try new things, motivated by the desire to help others. In addition to these experiences developing leadership competencies (Jones, 2016) we conclude that they also have the potential to develop cross-cultural competencies.

The most pronounced finding in Study 2 was that the level of contextual novelty to develop cross-cultural competencies might vary depending on the individuals' baseline level of cross-cultural competencies. This finding lends support for individually-determined stretch assignments to accelerate employee development (Ohlott, 2004; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998) and extends this to the development of cross-cultural competencies. We found that employees with high cross-cultural competencies prior to the start of the international volunteer experience showed the greatest gain from the experience when they were assigned internationally. For those employees with lower baseline cross-cultural competencies domestic volunteer assignments were developmental opportunities. For them, the non-profit context was enough of a novel context for competency development to occur.

A possible explanation for this finding could be that the presence of a baseline level of cross-cultural competencies facilitate the development of higher levels of cross-cultural competencies. This finding extends Kayes, Kayes, and Yamazaki's (2005) theory that international assignments are developmental because they increase knowledge absorption abilities, many of which sound like cross-cultural competencies, including valuing difference cultures, building relationships, listening and observing, coping with ambiguity, managing others, translating complex ideas, and the like. More specifically, tolerance of ambiguity and curiosity may accelerate development because they push individuals toward better understanding of the environment (Townsend & Cairns, 2003). Perspective-taking, humility, and relationship-building may help individuals learn from people within the cross-cultural environment and further their understanding of how to adapt their practices and approaches (Bird et al., 2010; Caligiuri et al., 2016; McCloskey, Behymer, Papautsky, Ross, & Abbe, 2010).

Another explanation for this finding could be the presence of stable personality traits inherent in cross-cultural competencies. These traits may facilitate the natural tendency for individuals to engage in the behaviors necessary for development (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012; Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1999). For example, the personality traits of "openness and extraversion may predispose individuals to seek out experiences and interact with people from different cultures" (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012, 615) and are predictors of individuals' motivation to learn. Having a high level of emotional stability, another personality trait, fosters one's desire to seek out novel, cross-cultural experiences in the first place (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012). This explanation is consistent with Caligiuri and Tarique's (2012) finding that personality characteristics (extraversion, openness to experience, and lower neuroticism) combined with cross-cultural experiences to predict dynamic cross-cultural competencies, such as tolerance of ambiguity, cultural flexibility.

Researchers in the field of corporate social responsibility (CSR) have called for research to provide greater theoretical and empirical evidence around the benefits of CSR (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; McWilliams & Siegel, 2011). At the strategic level, our study links volunteerism programs with the firm-level strategic need to develop employees' cross-cultural competencies. Also, our study answers the call for more individual-level studies in the CSR area (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012), especially those directly investigating employees' competency development as a function of volunteerism (Jones, 2016). Jones (2016 p. 495) noted "there is great need for more rigorous testing of theoretically-driven hypotheses, especially with respect to testing evidence for skill development through volunteering." We hope additional studies will continue to investigate more nuanced questions related to the development of cross-cultural competencies through volunteerism.

4.1. Limitations

There are many positive aspects to the studies presented, such as the longitudinal design in both studies and, in Study 2, data from both employees and their supervisors. As with all studies, however, ours are not without limitations. To begin, our study focused on only those individuals who participated in a corporate volunteerism program. By only studying this one developmental opportunity, we were unable to contrast volunteerism programs with other talent development initiatives whether domestically (e.g., rotational programs) or internationally (e.g., expatriate assignments). Comparing a control group of non-volunteers with volunteers would have strengthened the conclusions around the relative comparison of volunteerism compared to other organizational initiatives.

While this study went a long way in helping to understand the features of the experience that helped foster development, it did not assess the actual behaviors exhibited by the participants which led to their development. Future studies should examine the actual behaviors in which volunteers engage to differentially foster the development of cross-cultural competencies. Across both studies, collecting longitudinal data for two years over time and with multiple raters was a significant effort that, despite our best efforts, resulted in a modest sample size. This is an important issue given that our participating organization in Study 2 has one of the largest corporate volunteerism programs in the world. Future studies should attempt a consortium model whereby multiple organizations participate with similar constructs being examined. Two studies, each conducted within a different organization allowed us to reduce the number of moving parts being tested; however, it also limited our sample sizes. While we did have sufficient statistical power to test our hypothesized relationships, the relatively small sample size did not give us the required statistical power to test a more comprehensive model. Future studies could examine a wider array of individual, situational, and program differences.

Contextual novelty was central to our manuscript and operationalized in basic way (i.e., international or domestic assignments). While there is much to be learned from our measure of contextual novelty because it enabled us to isolate the unique effect of having the same experience in a foreign country, the measure could certainly be expanded. For example, Kogut and Singh (1988) index of cultural distance could be used based on the variation along each of Hofstede's (1980) four original cultural dimensions or the nine dimensions in the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004). Future studies should consider a more robust measure of cultural distance as a sub-feature of contextual novelty and drill down with respect to how specific facets of novelty affect development. For example, while on volunteer assignments, employees must confront a variety of practical issues in the nonprofit environment that are uncommon in the corporate environment (Grant, 2012).

With respect to project meaningfulness, given the nature of volunteer projects, one can expect highly positively skewed scores, as found in the present study. It is also possible that meaningfulness is a more complex construct than the one used on our study. In the present study, we captured meaningfulness by measuring the extent to which volunteers felt they were successful in completing their project for their partner NGO. Future studies should investigate meaningfulness as a broader construct. For example, a volunteer may have felt that their assignment was meaningful because they experienced personal development, despite that they did not feel they made a meaningful impact on their partner organization Or, the participants might recognize that their well-intended and executed project had only a minor effect on the NGO compared to vast need of the community being served. Future studies should consider meaningfulness on a variety of internal and external dimensions and as a multidimensional construct (e.g., meaningful for personal development, meaningful for community impact, meaningful for NGO project success, and meaningful for the community being served).

As with testing project meaningfulness in future studies, social support should also be developed further as a construct. The nature of the volunteer work tends to tighten the bonds among people, creating a natural support system among volunteers and NGO staff. This reality of volunteer work positively skews scores on social support, which was found in the present study. While our social support measure tapped into both perceived institutional and leader support, future research should consider sources of support offered (e.g., organizational or individual), the nature of the support provided (e.g., informational, instrumental, emotional), and the extent to which support is perceived. Social support can be derived from several sources, including the NGO leaders, NGO staff members, project team, host national volunteers, and fellow program participants and these sources may differentially affect the development of cross-cultural competencies and be perceived differently. For example, the NGO might have social support practices in place, but the volunteers might not be able to derive the benefit from them due to linguistic or cultural differences. On the other hand, volunteers might perceive significant support from their fellow volunteers (they are living and working together for the duration of their time on assignment), but this source of perceived support might have a limited influence on the development of cross-cultural competencies. The source of support relative to the mechanism through which cross-cultural competencies are developed should be investigated in future studies.

There is a question of whether, and at what point, a ceiling effect would be possible. Are highly cross-culturally competent professionals unable to continue learning and developing from their cross-cultural experiences? This issue needs to be addressed from the perspectives of both measurement and theory. It might be the case that our current assessment tools, such as those used in the present studies, are unable to be sensitive enough to detect changes at the highest level of competencies. It is also the case that some individuals might backslide in cross-cultural competencies after having had significant experiences if they become over confident in their skills. Clearly, more needs to be understood about the nature of individuals who would follow the various possible trajectories not considered in this paper.

4.2. Practical implications

Our practical goal for this study was to assess whether short-term international experiences were a potential alternative to longer expatriate assignments for the development of critical cross-cultural competencies. We believe we were successful in this regard, demonstrating the efficacy of international corporate volunteer programs as valid developmental programs. It is important for practitioners to recognize that it is the quality of a cross-cultural experience, and not the duration of the experience, that makes a given experience developmental. Thus, practitioners involved talent development should work to craft cross-cultural experiences with key features of contextual novelty, meaningfulness, and support. As an example, talent development could work directly with global mobility to create assignments that provide enough of a cultural stretch, possibly omitting the use of expatriate enclaves in housing to foster greater novelty or providing more language support to foster more social learning.

Our general finding that contextual features matter for cross-cultural competency development needs to be interpreted with an understanding from our results that what is considered novel for one employee might not be for another. Based on our study, it is most important for talent development professionals to match contextual novelty to employees' readiness for a given cross-cultural experience. Baseline assessments of cross-cultural competencies could be used to determine who is ready for what level of novelty. After the cross-cultural experience, a post-assignment assessment of cross-cultural competencies should be used to assess whether change occurred and the extent to which employees are ready for the next level assignment.

For the sake of global social impact, another practical use for this

study is to provide an additional proof point on the strategic value of international corporate volunteerism programs. While ICV programs are known to help foster employee engagement and improve corporate reputation, they are also – when well designed – a talent development initiative. Given the strategic benefits, it is not surprising that the rate of ICV programs is growing faster than any other category of corporate philanthropy (Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy, 2016). Our results, we hope, will serve to foster their inception further with a more strategic partnership between HR and CSR.

In conclusion, we agree with Stan Litow, IBM's Vice President of Corporate Citizenship and Corporate Affairs and President of IBM's Foundation who, when speaking on 5th anniversary of the IBM Corporate Service Corps (IBM's ICV program), offered a call to action for the Fortune 500. Mr. Litow said:

> "Just imagine, if every Fortune 500 company sent only 100 of their top employees a year on a program similar to IBM's, well, instead of thousands, we could be impacting millions of communities and people around the globe. If we want to continue affecting real change then this is certainly an important and effective way to do it."

We echo this call to action and hope more firms will consider international corporate volunteerism as a global talent development initiative with an additional benefit of positive global social impact. We believe this would be a win-win-win for companies, employees, and the communities they serve.

Authors' notes

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