

Intercultural Workplace Interactions of Indonesian Expatriates in A Multicultural and Multinational Environment in Qatar

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Keywords:

Culture Shock; Cross-Cultural Adaptation; Intercultural Competence; Multinational Workplace; Indonesian Expatriates

Abstract

Intercultural interaction is inevitable for people who work abroad, and Indonesian expatriates working in Qatar are no exception. This study identified that Indonesian expatriates experienced culture shock and adaptation challenges during their first year of service in Qatar, and it proposes practical support mechanisms to improve workplace adaptation. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected from Indonesian expatriates through open-ended questionnaires and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by Hofstede's, Hall's, and Lewis's intercultural frameworks. The findings indicate that similarities between Indonesians' and Qataris' Hall High-Context cultural characteristics do not automatically ensure smooth adaptation. Differences in workplace communication, environmental context, language proficiency, mental resilience, soft skills, and access to country-specific information contribute to adaptation challenges. The study also identifies the importance of institutional and diaspora-based support. Therefore, this study recommends strengthening the role of the Indonesian Embassy in Doha and Indonesian diaspora groups through digital guidance channels, such as an interactive website, to support potential and newly arrived Indonesian expatriates in Qatar.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has made migration across borders increasingly common, with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds interacting in both social and professional environments. This phenomenon often leads to culture shock—a psychological discomfort that occurs when individuals from different cultures interact (Hofstede, 2010). Culture shock typically manifests as feelings of distress, helplessness, and hostility toward new environments, particularly during the initial period of cross-cultural contact (Dailey-Strand et al., 2021; Furnham, 2019; Pacheco, 2020; Syawaludin et al., 2020).

Indonesian expatriates working in the Middle East, particularly in Qatar, encounter unique intercultural challenges. Beyond language barriers and professional competency requirements, these individuals must navigate a complex landscape of multiple nationalities and cultural norms (Karimova et al., 2024; Kassis-Henderson et al., 2018). The authors' observations and informal discussions with Indonesian expatriates in Qatar reveal recurring patterns of culture shock during the first year of service, with some individuals making the difficult decision to return to Indonesia within this critical period (Johnson, 2024; Mukhtar, 2026; Rosida, 2018).

Qatar, a peninsula in the Arabian Gulf, has become an important destination for international professionals. As of March 2025, Qatar's population of approximately 3.12 million comprises more than 100 nationalities, with only 0.7% being Indonesian expatriates (approximately 25,000 individuals). The country combines rapid modernization with Islamic traditions, creating a unique cultural environment. Qatar's strategic importance in global business, due to its LNG exports, its hosting of major international sporting events including the FIFA World Cup 2022, and its significant economic resources, positions it as a major hub for expatriate employment across the energy, telecommunications, banking, and service industries.

While Indonesian culture and Qatari culture share the High-Context dimension according to Hall's model, this apparent cultural similarity does not guarantee smooth adaptation for Indonesian expatriates. Different internal contexts developed from geographical, climatic, and regional influences create significant intercultural gaps (Koehrsen, 2021; Semple, 2023). Additionally, Indonesian expatriates often experience an intensification of the Lewis Reactive dimension when facing workplace adaptation challenges, creating vulnerability to prolonged culture shock effects (Amol et al., 2025; Apriyanti, 2017; Lewis, 2018). Critical factors including limited foreign language proficiency, insufficient mental resilience, inadequate communication skills, and a lack of comprehensive pre-arrival information exacerbate these challenges.

This study addresses two primary research questions: (1) What are the root causes of culture shock among Indonesian expatriates when they arrive and work in Qatar, and what key cultural barriers affect the interaction between their Indonesian cultural background and Qatar's working environment? (2) As a contribution, what solutions can be proposed to minimize or eliminate the effects of culture shock on the workplace performance of Indonesian expatriates in Qatar, particularly during their first year of service, and how can support from the Indonesian Embassy (KBRI) contribute to these efforts?

The purpose of the study is to focus exclusively on the culture shock experienced by Indonesian expatriates during their initial year in Qatar, to prevent the adaptation challenges from affecting their work performance. Participants include Indonesian nationals holding Indonesian passports who came to Qatar for professional work based on specific education, expertise, and competency levels from diverse sectors including energy, banking, telecommunications, healthcare, aviation, and hospitality. The study employs purposive and snowball sampling with 35 respondents and applies data saturation principles to ensure validity. The research does not attempt to generalize findings to all expatriate populations in Qatar or other Middle Eastern countries.

Culture shock is an inevitable phenomenon when individuals from different cultural backgrounds interact (Hofstede, 2010). This study examines culture shock through three complementary intercultural frameworks. Hofstede's Six Cultural Dimensions analysis of Indonesia and Qatar reveals significant differences in power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism orientation, masculinity-femininity preferences, long-term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint dimensions. While both countries share collectivist values, their internal contexts differ substantially due to geographical distance (over 7,000 km), climate differences (tropical versus sub-tropical), and regional cultural influences (Paul et al., 2020; Singh, n.d.).

Lewis's Cultural Types model categorizes cultures into Linear-Active (task-oriented, direct communication), Multi-Active (relationship-oriented, emotional expression), and Reactive (listening-oriented, consensus-building) types. Indonesian culture aligns primarily with the Reactive type, characterized by respect for hierarchy, indirect communication, and a preference for harmony. Qatar's dominant cultures reflect both Multi-Active (Arabic) and Reactive (Indian subcontinent) characteristics, creating a complex multicultural workplace environment.

Hall's High-Context/Low-Context Communication model explains that High-Context cultures rely heavily on implicit communication, non-verbal cues, and shared understanding, while Low-Context cultures depend on explicit verbal communication. Both Indonesian and Qatari cultures are High-Context, yet their internal contexts differ significantly due to distinct regional, climate, and historical influences.

The study employs a triangulated approach using these three intercultural frameworks as analytical lenses to understand culture shock mechanisms among Indonesian expatriates. The research hypothesizes that culture shock intensity is determined by intercultural competence level, prior cross-cultural experience, available support systems, and specific vulnerability factors including language proficiency, mental resilience, and communication skills.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach with phenomenological strategy to understand the lived experiences of Indonesian expatriates during their initial year in Qatar. The research design includes eight sequential steps: (1) defining the business issue and research questions through stakeholder analysis, (2) selecting qualitative approach aligned with the complex, context-dependent nature of cultural adaptation, (3) establishing clear sampling criteria, (4) conducting data collection through open-ended questionnaires, (5) analyzing responses to identify root causes, (6) proposing solutions based on identified coping strategies and stakeholder insights, (7) conducting triangulation through probing and internal cross-reference analysis, and (8) formulating evidence-based recommendations.

Data Collection Method

The study collected data through structured questionnaires written in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure clarity and comfort for respondents with varying English proficiency levels. The questionnaire included demographic questions and 15 open-ended questions addressing culture shock identification, adaptation challenges, institutional support, community participation, workplace dynamics, and pull factors for remaining in Qatar. Respondents were 35 Indonesian professional expatriates randomly selected from diverse industries including oil and gas, banking, telecommunications, hospitality, aviation, and healthcare sectors. Data collection occurred between November 19-26, 2025, in Qatar. The collected data mapped based on the Industry and Occupation Level in the following charts.

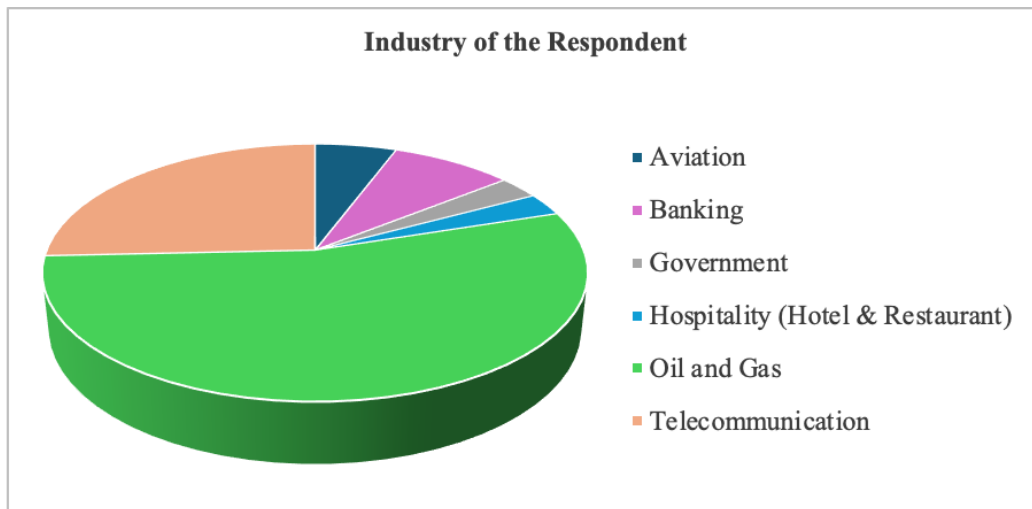


Figure 1. The Industries Distribution of the Respondents in Data Collection Questionnaire

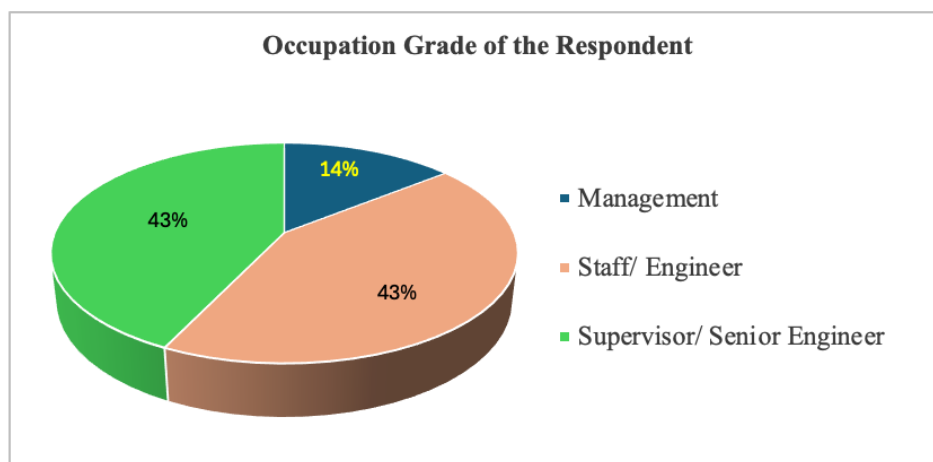


Figure 2. The Distribution of Occupation Grade of the Respondents in Data Collection Questionnaire

The questionnaire for Data Collection took place between November 19th, 2025, and November 26th, 2025 (eight days), in Qatar. The respondents were selected purposively based on their relevance to the study criteria, and additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling, they have to be Indonesian Expatriate with professional skill or competence to work in Qatar and from diverse industries in Qatar where Indonesian Expatriate work. As result, the industries distribution and Level Distribution of the respondent are shown Figure 1 and 2 above. The study coded, grouped and mapped the collected data from the questionnaire response in related Intercultural Framework for each open question. The respondent's diversity was intentionally sought to strengthen the richness of perspectives and to reflect variation in workplace settings and interaction patterns.

To strengthen data quality, the study employed triangulation through probing on unclear or generic responses that could not be mapped to the three intercultural frameworks. This iterative clarification process ensured comprehensive understanding of respondent experiences and reduced ambiguity in thematic analysis.

Data Analysis Method

Data analysis employed thematic analysis combined with SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) framework. The process involved coding respondent statements, grouping codes into themes, and mapping themes to the three intercultural frameworks (Hofstede, Lewis, Hall). The grouped codes were then categorized using SWOT analysis to identify internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external environmental factors (opportunities and threats). This approach enabled synthesis of qualitative insights into strategic categories relevant for understanding intercultural workplace dynamics.

Data Saturation

To measure the Data Saturation on the dataset from the collected responses, The study used Mathematical Evidence of Saturation as a validation technique, with reference to Guest, Namey and Chen (2020). By tracking the number or mathematical emergence rate of new codes across consecutive phases of respondents, the study successfully demonstrated a flattened curve, achieving informational redundancy by the final phase.

It initiated by coded, grouped and mapped the dataset to the designated Intercultural frameworks. These groupings are referred to as themes. In the Data Saturation validation, the study used these themes to measure the data saturation using the Mathematical Evidence of Saturation on a per-respondent basis. From the validation exercise, the study found thirteen unique themes at the beginning with Respondent 1, which declined to zero unique theme by Respondent 34 and 35. The graphical representation of the Data Saturation result as follow.

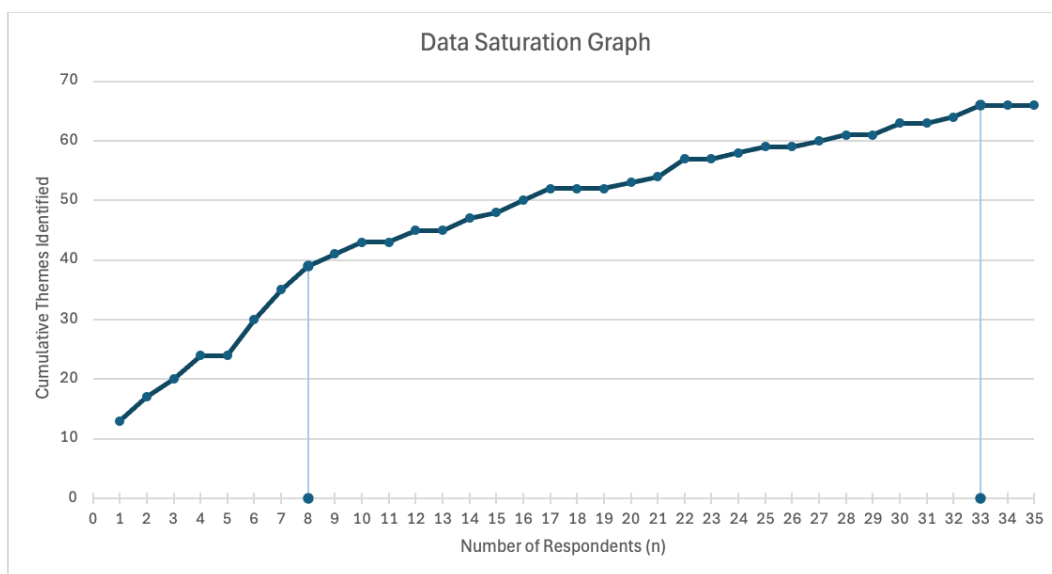


Figure 3. Data Saturation Graph

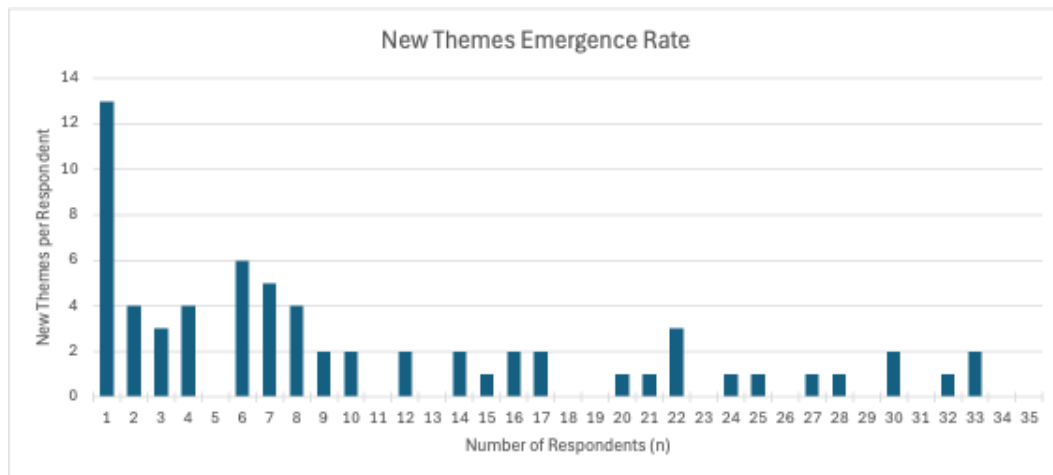


Figure 4. The New Themes Emergence Rate Graph

Further, to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the qualitative findings, this study employed Probing and internal data cross-reference triangulation. The Probing done on the responses with doubt and uncertainty, the study verified it individually to the respective respondents. The internal data cross-reference triangulation with reference to Miles et al. (2014), even minimal responses can contribute meaningfully to pattern identification when they are linked to other data through systematic comparison. Specifically, in instances where respondents utilized highly implicit, abbreviated language typical of Hall - High-Context with reference to designated Intercultural frameworks - such as single-word affirmations in overarching adaptation inquiries - the data was not able or difficult to be analyzed. Instead, the study utilized hidden thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) to cross-reference these abbreviated responses against the detailed structural competencies and organizational appraisals provided by the same respondents to the different questions in the questionnaire.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The study involved 35 Indonesian professional expatriates residing in Qatar during the data collection period. Respondents represented a diverse cross-section of industries and organizational levels. The distribution included: oil and gas operations (23%, n=8), banking and finance (17%, n=6), telecommunications (14%, n=5), hospitality (11%, n=4), aviation (9%, n=3), healthcare (9%, n=3), and government/other sectors (7%, n=2). This sector diversity reflects the actual distribution of Indonesian expatriate employment in Qatar and strengthens the generalizability of findings across economic sectors.

Respondents held diverse organizational positions ranging from entry-level professionals to senior management. Notably, 73% of respondents (n=26) had prior expatriate work experience before coming to Qatar, primarily from other Middle Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Oman. The remaining 27% (n=9) were experiencing international employment for the first time. Length of residence in Qatar varied from less than one year to over nineteen years, with the majority (71%, n=25) having completed at least one year of service. This heterogeneity in experience levels provided rich comparative data for understanding adaptation trajectories.

Intercultural Framework Analysis and Findings

The analysis revealed that Hall's High-Context dimension emerged as the most pervasive framework across respondent experiences. This dimension was evidenced in nine of the twenty study questions either as primary (7 questions) or secondary (2 questions) analytical framework. Respondents demonstrated characteristic High-Context behaviors including implicit expectations of organizational and governmental support without explicit requests, reliance on shared cultural cues for interpreting workplace norms, preference for acquiring knowledge through relationship-based channels rather than formal information systems, and hesitation to seek direct clarification on ambiguous instructions. These High-Context behaviors created both advantages (rapid relationship building with in-group members) and vulnerabilities (potential for misunderstanding in explicitly multicultural settings).

Hofstede's Long-Term Orientation dimension was equally significant, affecting nine questions as either primary or secondary framework. This dimension manifested through respondents demonstrated persistence in adapting to unfamiliar workplace environments, patience in tolerating initial discomfort and inefficiency during the learning phase, willingness to invest time in building long-term professional relationships, and commitment to fulfilling obligations to employers and colleagues despite personal challenges. The Long-Term Orientation trait proved critical for understanding why respondents maintained employment despite initial culture shock severity; they framed temporary discomfort as an acceptable investment in long-term career advancement and family welfare.

A striking paradox emerged regarding mental resilience: 53% of respondents (n=19) explicitly identified mental resilience as a critical deficit requiring development during their first year of service, citing insufficiency in confidence, emotional stability, work motivation, and patience. However, when asked to describe the strengths of Indonesian expatriates from employers' perspectives (post-adaptation), 89% of respondents reported that employers specifically praised mental toughness, emotional resilience, persistent work attitude, and ability to maintain composure under pressure. This paradox illuminates the expatriate adaptation lifecycle: traits that initially appear as liabilities (passive acceptance, patience with ambiguity, emotional restraint) become organizational assets once adaptation is successfully negotiated. The initial vulnerability in mental resilience stems from heightened sensitivity during culture shock ('baper' in Indonesian parlance, referring to excessive emotional reactivity), while post-adaptation mental resilience reflects the internalized emotional regulation developed through sustained cross-cultural negotiation.

Root Causes of Culture Shock and Adaptation Challenges

Analysis identified multiple root causes contributing to culture shock intensity among Indonesian expatriates. First, communication barriers related to inadequate English proficiency constituted the most frequently cited challenge (77%, n=27 respondents), with particular difficulties in multinational workplace settings where colleagues from multiple nations use English as a second language with varied proficiency levels and regional dialects. Respondents reported that grammatical incorrectness and accent-related misunderstandings created anxiety during meetings and presentations, leading to self-censorship and reduced participation. The challenge intensified in technical discussions where domain-specific terminology compounded language deficiency.

Second, different internal contexts despite cultural similarities emerged as a subtle but significant root cause. While Hall's High-Context framework suggests that Qatari and Indonesian cultures should share communication patterns, respondents identified substantial differences in implicit workplace norms, hierarchy expression, conflict resolution approaches, and emotional display rules. These differences stemmed from geographical distance, climate influences (tropical Indonesia versus sub-tropical Qatar), historical experiences, and regional cultural traditions. For example, the extreme heat in summer Qatar creates different work schedules and outdoor activity patterns compared to Indonesia, affecting workplace socialization norms and informal interaction opportunities.

Third, lack of pre-arrival information about critical logistical and environmental factors created unexpected stress. 71% of respondents (n=25) reported surprise and initial distress regarding: extreme summer temperatures exceeding 50°C, different weekend patterns (Friday-Saturday in Qatar versus Saturday-Sunday in Indonesia), school system differences affecting expatriate families, complex bureaucratic procedures for visa and Qatar ID acquisition, and significantly higher cost of living than anticipated. This information gap extended to cultural aspects including gender segregation in certain public spaces, stricter dress codes in religious contexts, and behavioral expectations in formal business settings.

Fourth, weak institutional support structure during the initial arrival period exacerbated adaptation challenges. Of the respondents, 69% (n=24) reported that they contacted Indonesian Embassy (KBRI) Doha to register their presence in Qatar, but 88% of these (n=21) reported receiving no structured guidance on cultural adaptation, workplace norms, or practical settlement assistance beyond basic consular services. This expectation-reality gap reflects High-Context cultural dynamics: respondents implicitly expected that KBRI, as a government institution representing Indonesia, would recognize their need for orientation support without requiring explicit requests. The absence of proactive institutional support created information vacuums that respondents filled through informal diaspora networks, often receiving inconsistent or incomplete guidance.

Fifth, unclear workplace cultural norms in multicultural environments created persistent uncertainty. Despite 97% of respondents identifying as Muslims and working in an Islamic country, they reported confusion about appropriate behavior boundaries, decision-making protocols, communication formality levels, and conflict resolution approaches in workplaces comprising Qatari nationals, Arab expatriates, South Asian expatriates, Western expatriates, and other nationalities. The expected cultural similarity between Indonesia and Qatar provided insufficient guidance for navigating this complex multicultural environment.

Significantly, prior expatriate experience emerged as a powerful mitigating factor. Respondents with previous international work experience (n=26, 73%) reported substantially easier adaptation, with 85% describing their transition as 'relatively easy' compared to only 22% of first-time expatriates. This finding suggests that intercultural competence developed through prior cross-cultural exposure—including skills in cultural pattern recognition, ambiguity tolerance, perspective-taking, and adaptive communication—substantially reduces culture shock intensity. Deardorff's model of intercultural competence posits that such competence comprises attitudes (respect, openness, curiosity), knowledge (cultural self-awareness, sociolinguistic awareness), and skills (listening, observing, interpreting,

adaptability). Prior expatriate experience appears to have developed these competencies, enabling more rapid and less distressing adaptation.

Positive Adaptation Outcomes and Enabling Mechanisms

Despite significant initial adaptation challenges, the study documented remarkably positive long-term outcomes. Of the 35 respondents, 34 (97%) reported successful adaptation by the completion of their first year or during subsequent years of residence in Qatar. Beyond simple adaptation, 49% (n=17) reported receiving tangible recognition from employers including promotions, expanded responsibilities, salary increases, or selection for leadership development programs. These positive outcomes emerged despite the documented culture shock challenges, suggesting powerful enabling mechanisms at work.

Analysis identified three primary enabling mechanisms. First, Indonesian diaspora community support created psychological safety nets and practical guidance channels. All respondents except three reported active participation in Indonesian community organizations (86%, n=30), with motivations including relationship maintenance, experience sharing, mutual aid, and recreation. The diaspora communities functioned as informal onboarding systems, providing newcomers with practical guidance on housing, school selection, visa procedures, restaurant recommendations, and workplace cultural navigation. Importantly, these communities leveraged shared language, cultural background, and implicit understanding to communicate tacit knowledge that might be difficult to convey through formal channels. The diaspora networks also provided emotional support during difficult adjustment periods, validating expatriates' experiences and normalizing culture shock as a temporary, manageable condition.

Second, demonstrated professional competence and reliability created organizational acceptance and integration. Employers consistently reported in respondent accounts that Indonesian expatriates earned respect through technical competence (91% of respondent reports mentioned skills recognition), work ethic and dedication (94% mentioned hard work recognition), reliability in meeting commitments (83% mentioned reliability recognition), and low-conflict workplace behavior (77% mentioned positive interpersonal comments). These professional attributes appear sufficient to overcome initial cultural misunderstandings and to create organizational incentives for supporting expatriate integration. As one respondent noted, employers seem willing to accommodate cultural differences when employees reliably deliver organizational value.

Third, mobilization of Hofstede's Long-Term Orientation cultural trait enabled sustained effort through the challenging adaptation period. Rather than interpreting culture shock as evidence of wrong fit, respondents with strong Long-Term Orientation framed initial discomfort as a temporary investment in long-term career advancement, family financial security, and professional development. This temporal reframing appears to have prevented premature job termination and allowed time for adaptation mechanisms to operate. Additionally, family support emerged as significant for 20% of respondents (n=7) who explicitly mentioned that family members' encouragement helped them maintain effort during difficult periods.

Specific Vulnerabilities and Support Deficits

While adaptation outcomes were generally positive, the study identified specific vulnerability areas where support gaps created unnecessary suffering and reduced efficiency.

First, 77% of respondents reported that language deficiency created communication anxiety extending beyond workplace efficiency to emotional well-being. Respondents described anxiety before meetings, hesitation to participate in discussions, frustration with being unable to express ideas clearly, and interpersonal tension from repeated clarification requests. Enhanced English language training before or immediately upon arrival might substantially reduce this emotional burden.

Second, lack of country and workplace cultural information created preventable stress. Respondents who had received advance information about Qatar's climate, work schedules, cost of living, and cultural norms reported smoother transitions than those encountering these realities without preparation. The expectation-reality gap for practical factors (heat, school systems, bureaucracy) appeared almost as significant as cultural differences in determining early-stage adaptation difficulty.

Third, institutional support deficiency created information gaps filled inconsistently by informal networks. While diaspora communities proved valuable, not all information flowed effectively through informal channels, and newcomers with limited community connections faced information scarcity. Structured institutional support from KBRI could have systematized information delivery while maintaining cultural appropriateness through diaspora partnership.

Fourth, absent pre-departure mental preparation left respondents unprepared for psychological aspects of culture shock. Several respondents reported surprise at emotional intensity of culture shock, misinterpreting their reactions as evidence of unsuitability for expatriate life. Advance psycho-education about culture shock as a normal, temporary condition might have reduced pathological interpretations and enabled more effective coping.

Mapping to Intercultural Frameworks: Synthesis

The comprehensive analysis demonstrates how the three intercultural frameworks illuminate different dimensions of Indonesian expatriate experiences in Qatar. The Hall High-Context framework explains both the advantages (rapid in-group integration through implicit cultural understanding) and vulnerabilities (potential misunderstanding in explicitly multicultural environments, implicit expectations of support without explicit requests). The Hofstede Long-Term Orientation dimension clarifies why adaptation persists despite initial challenges: expatriates maintain effort through temporal reframing of discomfort as investment in long-term benefits.

The Lewis Reactive framework reveals why Indonesian expatriates' conflict-avoidance preferences, respect for hierarchy, and listening orientation—while creating harmony—simultaneously limit their voice in workplace decision-making and visibility for advancement opportunities. Several respondents noted that while they successfully adapted and earned employer respect, their Reactive preference for working quietly and avoiding confrontation sometimes resulted in more outspoken colleagues receiving more visible promotions.

Together, these frameworks paint a nuanced picture of Indonesian expatriates as culturally resilient, professionally reliable, and emotionally stable professionals who navigate multicultural workplaces effectively once initial culture shock is overcome, yet who benefit from structured support systems that bridge cultural gaps, provide explicit information, and validate their adaptation experiences.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Indonesian expatriates experienced culture shock and adaptation challenge during their first year of service in Qatar. The similarity on Hall High-Context intercultural dimension between Indonesian expatriates and Qatari society do not automatically guarantee Indonesian expatriates can successfully pass the first year of service in Qatar well. Different internal context which built based on the regional and climate influence created significant gap. Further, we also found the indication of deepen on dimension Lewis Reactive, when Indonesian expatriates faced adaptation challenge in their workplace. Finally, the deficit on following factors would widen the gap such as foreign language proficiency, mental resilience, communication and soft skill, and information on the Country Information.

Hence, the study proposed recommendation by improving support from Indonesian Embassy – Doha with Indonesia Diaspora groups in Qatar, which are among the main stakeholders in this research, to provide a channel and touchpoint via digital media such as interactive website to reach the potential and newly arrived Indonesian expatriates to work in Qatar and provide proper guidance about Qatar, their customs and tradition, including cultures in workplace to improve the condition and make more Indonesian expatriates able to pass their first year of service in Qatar effectively.

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