

THE PROCESSES OF BEING EMPLOYED AS FOREIGN HOSPITAL EMPLOYEES IN THAILAND: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

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Abstract

Background: Currently, labor mobility has been an issue of interest among ASEAN countries with the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) at the end of 2015, which allows the free movement of healthcare providers within the countries. The aims of a study were to explore the characteristics of foreign hospital employees, factors influencing decision making of the foreigners, the process of being employed as foreign hospital employees, and problems or obstacles encountered while working in Thailand.

Methods: One hundred foreign hospital employees in both government and private hospitals in Thailand were recruited using snowball sampling. This mixed-method study used a questionnaire and in-depth interviews for data collection. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, whereas the qualitative data was analyzed using the thematic analysis.

Results: The results revealed that most participants were females and 38% of foreign hospital employees were Philippine nationality. Most participants had moderate and high English language proficiencies, respectively. Supporting factors of the success in applying to work in

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Thailand included level of education, competencies/ special skills that are needed, and ability to communicate in Thai. Factors influencing decision making of the foreigners to Thailand seeking employment were both push factors, such as low wages, limited job availability, limited career progression, high living expenses, and pull factors, including gaining new experience, job opportunities, higher wages, better work benefits, low living expenses, opportunities to pursue higher education, being international health hub, safety of life and property, and educational collaboration. Furthermore, personal and family factors were indicated, such as ambition, exploring new experiences, and having family members living or working in Thailand. The processes of being employed as foreign healthcare providers included 1) preparing phase: language, working knowledge and employment laws, and health check-ups 2) applying phase: applying for a job by themselves after receiving information from the internet, friends, or relatives. A tourist visa was granted when initially arriving in Thailand and then changed to a non-immigrant visa “B”. The expenses involved in preparing for and coming to work included a VISA, passport, work permit, and travel. Most participants were working as medical service assistants, such as interpreters. Work permit renewal and adjusting to social and cultural differences were indicated as problems or obstacles encountered while working in Thailand.

Conclusions: The recommendations of the study were as follows: 1) the organization or employer should provide a basic training program in language and culture for foreign hospital employees, improve the regulations of VISA, MRA, professional licenses and 2) the organization or employer should improve workplace culture, such as being treated equally.

Keywords: processes; being employed; foreign hospital employees

Introduction

Currently, labor mobility has been an issue of interest among ASEAN countries with the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) at the end of 2015, which allows the free movement of healthcare providers within ASEAN countries. Efforts to enhance the skilled labor movement in the ASEAN community has mainly relied on Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs), which allow for a worker’s skills, experience, and accreditations to be recognized across ASEAN countries, permitting them to work outside their home country (Department of Trade Negotiations, 2011).

In 2006, ASEAN Member States signed the Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) for Nursing Services and in 2009 signed the MRAs for Medical Practitioners and Dental Services. Therefore, movement of the health professionals flowed from member countries with

lower level of development to countries with higher level of development. These movements may create both positive and negative impacts. In terms of positive impacts, there are job opportunities and knowledge exchange whereas negative impacts include quality of services caused by language limitation, different levels of education and culture, and insufficient number of health professionals in countries of origin (Sungayuth & Pachanee, 2014).

Conclusion, as an ASEAN member state, Thailand may be affected by the MRAs. Identifying and understanding the process of being employed as foreign hospital employees in Thailand are as important for further improvement of best practices on standards and qualifications.

Objective

To explore the characteristics of foreign hospital employees, factors influencing decision making of the foreigners coming to Thailand seeking employment, the process of being employed as foreign healthcare providers, expenses for applying to work, the preparation, job description and responsibilities during employment in Thailand as well as problems or obstacles encountered while working in Thailand.

Methodology

Research design

A mixed method design was used for conducting this research that included a questionnaire and in-depth interviews for data collection.

Participants and Setting

Participants were recruited using a snowball technique by obtaining information regarding foreign workers from friends, colleagues, and school of nursing alumni who were working in the hospitals around the country in Thailand. One hundred questionnaires received from foreign healthcare providers in both government and private hospitals in Thailand. Sixteen participants were recruited for an in-depth interview.

Data collection

Quantitative data was collected by a questionnaire with 100 foreign healthcare providers who were currently working in both government and private hospitals in Thailand. Qualitative data was collected by an individual in-depth interview with 16 foreign healthcare providers in order to examine the views of the process of being employed as foreign hospital employees in Thailand.

Ethical issues

The study was approved by the Faculty of Nursing Research Ethics Committee, Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics including frequency percentage mean, standard deviation, and thematic analysis.

Results

The results of the study were divided into two dimensions as follows:

1. Results from Quantitative Data Collection

1.1 Characteristics of foreign hospital employees who were employed in Thailand

The results showed that the majority of subjects were females (62%), only 38% were males. Most of them were Filipinos (35%), between 19-56 years old (Mean = 31.23, S.D. = 7.33). Seventy-three of the subjects were employed at private hospitals, with more than 200 beds. Fifty-one percent of the hospitals, where the subjects were employed, were in the central region of Thailand in Bangkok.

Most of the subjects (64%) graduated with a Bachelor's degree. Forty-one percent of them had Bachelor in Health Science degree, whereas thirty-nine had the degrees that were related to the medical field. The subjects' language proficiency showed that most of them could use Thai language and ninety-four percent of the subjects had a Thai language proficiency at a good level (31%). Thirty-six and forty-one of the subjects indicated that their Thai reading and writing skills were at poor levels. Ninety-nine percent of the subjects could speak, read, and write and their English proficiency was at an excellent level, 48, 49, and 49 percent, respectively. In addition, most of the subjects had other language (76%) proficiency with the primary language of Tagalog (35%).

Most of the subjects were employed within the five years prior to this study. Most of them were nurses (18%). The subjects who were nurses and physicians had professional experiences in their countries before coming to Thailand. The factors that enhanced their success of applying were their degrees (68%), their specialties which were needed for the job that they applied for (64%), and their ability to communicate using Thai language (55%).

1.2 Factors influencing decision making of the foreigner employees to seek employment in Thailand

The factors from their area of origin or push factors included insufficient income (45%), lack of progress in their career (27%), and poor benefits with a high cost of living (27%) whereas factors related to Thailand or pull factors included seeking new experience (82%), job opportunities (82%), an opportunity for employment (59%), and opportunities for career development (55%).

1.3 The process of being employed in the hospital as foreigner employees

1.3.1 The preparation process before coming to Thailand

The subjects received information about job opportunities in Thailand from various resources. Most of the subjects received the information from friends who were working in Thailand (57%), from friends who were working in the subjects' country and from the internet (23%). The subjects prepared themselves for language proficiency, knowledge, and health. Most of the subjects prepared for English proficiency (81%), some of them prepared for Thai language skills (48%). Only five percent of the subjects did not prepare themselves in anyway. Most of them prepared themselves without help from any resources (58%). For the

forty-one subjects who had Health Science degree, thirty-nine of them (95%) had passed professional license examination and had health professional license from their countries. Thirty-five of them were licensed nurses and four of them were license physicians.

To prepare for coming to Thailand, the study found that 92% of the subjects did not prepare their knowledge. Seven percent of the subjects prepared their knowledge by attending training programs to improve their specialty skills and pursued a Master's degree. For those who had Health Science degree, thirty-nine of them had passed professional license examination and had health professional license from their countries. Thirty-five of them were licensed nurses and four of them were license physicians. There were two subjects who did not specify whether they had taken the license examination. The majority of the subjects prepared their knowledge before coming to Thailand (68%). The subjects prepared by studying the laws such as employment policy and work policy in Thailand from their colleagues (56%). Fifty-eight of the subjects studied Thai culture, living costs, and Thai lifestyle from their colleagues. Fifty-one percent of the subjects had a health check-up before coming to Thailand.

1.3.2 The process of applying

Most of the subjects applied for a job by themselves (87%). The length of the time for the entire process, from starting the contact until the date of arrival in Thailand, were less than or equal to thirty days (one month) (30%). The shortest time for applying was one day and the longest was 2,190 days or six years (Mean=119.34, S.D=275.84). The lengths from applying to the accepting work in Thailand were less than or equal to thirty days (one month) (50%). The shortest time was one day, whereas the longest time was one year or 365 days or one year (Mean=57.07, S.D=57.01). The visa used for first entering Thailand was a Tourist visa (56%). The visa they were granted currently was a Working visa for most of the subjects (87%).

1.4 Job description

Ninety-three percent of the subjects were foreign healthcare support employees. They were employed as translators or health informants who provided support related to healthcare to the clients. Seven percent of the subjects were the MRA healthcare professionals including physicians and nurses who provided direct healthcare to the clients. Among foreign healthcare support employees, sixty-six of them were in-charge of only the work that was related to language translation. In contrast, twenty-seven of them involved in language translation as well as providing healthcare information to the clients. Although there were thirty-four subjects who had nursing degree from their countries, they only work as medical support staff because they had not yet had Thai nursing license.

Most of the foreign employees (79%) were satisfied with their jobs. Seventy-seven percent of them found that their present job was what they expected and relevant to their degree. Fifty percent of the subject found that their current job was relevant to their previous work experience. However, eighteen percent of the employees were not satisfied with their current jobs. Moreover, forty-one percent of the subjects were not satisfied with their salary and benefits. The study also found that twenty percent of the subjects did not get a job that they expected, which six of them were in group one healthcare support employees and fourteen of them were group two healthcare support employees. Forty-three of the subjects did not get a job that was

relevant to their former experience. In addition, the results showed that the average salary of the foreign employees in the hospital was 22,686.46 baht per month ((S.D. = 11,417.19). The salary of healthcare employees was 28,581.43 bath per month (S.D. = 20,105.42), whereas the salary of healthcare support was 22,020.90 baht per month (S.D. = 10,055.48)

Most of the subjects (70%) received medical fee benefits from the hospital in which they were employed. Seventy-nine percent of the subjects received assistance for visa and working permit renewal from the hospital they were employed. Forty-three subjects did not receive extended benefits for their families. The length of working in Thailand was between 11-60 months (one year-one month to five years) (Mean= 63.64, S.D. = 57.52). Fifty-eight of the subjects were first time employees in Thailand. Forty-nine percent of the subjects worked elsewhere before being employed in Thailand. Most of them used to be teachers (24.4%). Twenty-two percent of the subjects planned to continue to work in Thailand for another 13-60 months (one year-one month to five years). Seventy-one percent of the subjects had a plan to change their job within one year and fifty-one percent planned to move to other countries.

1.5 Problems or obstacles encountered while working in Thailand

Most of the subjects (75%) found that inability to communicate using Thai language was a major problem. When they had problems with their work most of them (72%) sought help from the head of their department, whereas some of subjects (43%) sought help from their Thai friends.

2. Results from Qualitative Data Collection

2.1 The characteristics of foreign hospital employees in Thailand

The characteristics which enhanced the success of foreign hospital employees in applying for a job were similar and included language proficiency, degree of education, and work experience. Language proficiency was the most needed qualification. Language proficiency included English proficiency and the language which foreign clients used as well as the ability to communicate using Thai language and the languages of the foreign healthcare providers themselves. The second qualification of importance was the degree of education and physician or nurse work experience due to the need for written and verbal communication using medical terminology.

2.2 Factors influencing the decision making of the foreigner hospital employee seeking employment in Thailand

The push factors from their original countries were low wages and benefits as well as low hiring rates. Their countries had high competition rates for job opportunities and a higher cost of living than Thailand. The pull factors from Thailand consisted of direct pull factors including high wages and high benefits. Working in Thailand, the participants explained that their salary started with 15,000 baht per month which was two times more salary than they received in their country. Moreover, they also received healthcare benefits from the hospital they were working. In addition, compared to other countries in Asia, Europe, and America, the opportunity to have a visa granted was easier and traveling expenses were less expensive. Furthermore, Thailand was an international country with a stable economic and political status as well as being a safe

country. Indirect pull factors were the collaboration between Thai and the neighboring countries' education institutions. These included scholarship offerings for the students from the neighboring countries to come to study in Thailand. Also, Thai education institutes and other countries had memorandums of understanding (MOU) agreeing to have exchange students. This opportunity gave exchange students good experiences and positive attitudes of working in Thailand. They could also find the opportunities to apply for a job in Thailand. Indirect pull factors including the geographical location of Thailand closeness to the neighboring countries in Asia, convenient international transportation, as well as social and cultural similarities influenced foreigners' decision making to seek employment in Thailand.

In addition to the direct and indirect pull factors, the individual and family characteristics were also factors influencing the foreigners' decision making to seek employment in Thailand. The individual's factors included ambition and seeking new challenges and experiences were also indirect pull factors. The family characteristics such as having a Thai spouse or Thai family and having to move to Thailand were also the pull factors. Other pull factors were called supportive factors. These factors included having friends or knowing someone who was working in the hospital giving information about job opportunities, which encouraged the foreigners to come to work in Thailand.

2.3 The process of being employed as foreign hospital employees in Thailand

The process was described into two main points: 1) the pattern of job seeking and 2) the process of being employed. The pattern of job seeking included getting information about the job opportunity from friends who were working in Thailand, searching for job opportunities via internet, being a tourist visiting Thailand and then looked for opportunities to work, moving with spouse, and being students in a university in Thailand. The process of being employed was composed of three stages: before coming to Thailand, during the period of employment, before the work permit and visa expired.

Before coming to Thailand, the foreigners sought information from internet, relatives, and friends. The foreigner applicants did not prepare themselves for any specialties and did not prepare their Thai language skills because most of the applicants applied for a job that was relevant to their education, experience, and proficiency. The applicants applied for a job using online services such email and line application, through which the applicants could contact the hospital directly.

During the period of employment, for the hospital that had a good foreigner hiring system and had continually recruited foreigners to work in the hospital, and operated with international standards, there was always a person who was in-charge of foreign employees. For this type of hospital, there was a formal orientation for foreign staff, in which foreign employees received precise information about their job descriptions, contract, salary, benefits, holiday, vacation, day off, rules, and regulations. In contrast, for the hospitals that had only a few numbers of foreign employees and foreign clients, there was not a good employment system. Therefore, these hospitals did not have a formal orientation and they were not able to provide precise information about job description and the hospital rules and regulations. Unclear information then led to confusion, and ineffective problem-solving strategies. In some cases, after working for a certain period, the foreign employees were asked to work more than what they had agreed to at the beginning, which led to the conflict in workplace. However, being an

employee at some hospitals, the foreign healthcare providers particularly the translators were encouraged to continually attend seminars, conferences, or training to update their knowledge about diseases, treatments, and patients' self-care, and to learn about working with colleagues and clients who had different cultures. However, some hospitals did not offer these opportunities to the foreign employees.

Before the work permit and visa expired was the period when foreign employees needed to renew their visa and work permit, which was normally valid only for one year. Each hospital and each province had different processes. Some hospitals prepared the documents for the visa and work permit renewal and paid for the renewal fees. In contrast, for some hospitals, the foreign employees would work on the renewal themselves; the hospitals only prepared required documents such as a reference, and work permit.

2.4 Job Description and Responsibility

The main responsibility was being a translator for employees and clients, translating Thai documents to other languages as needed and facilitating communication between clients and physicians or nurses. The responsibilities of foreign healthcare providers working in the hospital focused only the communication with foreign clients; therefore, they did not work with Thai clients because these foreign employees were limited in Thai language skills. Other responsibilities of foreign employees were teaching English to nurses and hospital staff. In addition to teaching Thai staff, some employees were requested to teach English and their language such as Khmer or Cambodian language.

The foreigners who had a medical or nursing degree from their country could not perform direct medical or nursing care to the patients because they did not have a professional license to work in Thailand. They felt that they could not use their professional knowledge and skills for their work. Yet, the foreigners who had other degrees which were not medical or nursing had encountered different difficulties. Particularly at the beginning of their job, they had difficulties understanding medical terminology such as diseases and the treatments. However, they tried to solve the problems by learning the terms from the internet. Therefore, later they felt more comfortable and had enough knowledge to do their job effectively.

When the foreigners were asked about job satisfaction, some of them were satisfied with their job, while some were not. Most of the foreigners who were not satisfied with their job were physicians and nurses because they could not practice their professional skills. Most of the foreigners who were not physicians or nurses were satisfied with their job because they could use the knowledge related to their degree and their former experience to apply to their job.

Regarding career progression, the foreign physicians and nurses as well as nonmedical employees, had similar opinions. Some of them were satisfied that they had opportunities to attend seminars, conferences, or trainings in which they could improve knowledge and gain experience necessary for their work. However, some of them were not satisfied because without professional licenses to practice their professional skills in Thailand, they could not have relevant training to gain more experience in their career; therefore, their career progression was limited to a non-professional duties.

The foreigners also described that the support from the hospital for them to attend relevant professional seminars or trainings was limited. However, most of the foreigners were

satisfied with their salary and benefits particularly health care benefits offered from the hospital that they would be able to use the hospital where there were employed for healthcare services. For the accommodation, some hospitals provided resident facilities for the foreigners with no chart, whereas some hospitals had the facility but the foreigners had to pay the rent. Some hospitals provided no accommodations or healthcare coverage for the foreigners.

During the time the foreigners were employed, they had to adjust to the customs and nature of Thai society and culture. The Thai work related cultures were different from the culture of some countries. For example, the foreigners described the differences such as being committed to work, being straightforward, and accepting positive/negative opinions for colleagues were not the nature of Thai people. However, they described that it was not burdensome because they were from Asian countries where the environment and climate were similar to those in Thailand.

2.5 Difficulties and obstacles related to work and problem solving

The most common difficulty for the foreigners without a medical or nursing background was being unable to understand medical terminology. Moreover, Asian foreigners described some conflicts due to the work atmosphere that they encountered as being treated unequally when they were compared to the Thai employees and the foreigners who were from Europe and America. They also described a non-standardized working system which led to miscommunication and misunderstandings. They found that sometimes they did not know what the expectations were from their employers.

Visa renewal was one of the difficulties as well. In some hospitals, the foreign employees had to renew the visa by themselves with no assistance from the hospital except providing them the letter of recommendation and work permit. The foreign employees found the process of visa renewal to be very burdensome because they could not be certain about time frame of getting their approval. Some of the foreign employees had to travel out of Thailand to the neighbor countries and apply for a visa, wait for it to be approved, and then travel back to Thailand with a new visa. In this case, the foreign employees felt uncertain as to whether they would be able to get it approved and might have trouble coming back to Thailand. Applying and traveling also cost a lot of money as well.

When the foreign hospital employees encountered the problems while they were living in Thailand, they sometimes tried to solve the problems by themselves and being successful. For example, for the problems regarding ineffective communication using technical terminology and Thai language, they solved the problems asking for help from their colleagues, self-studying by searching from the internet or reading books. However, there were some problems that they could not be solved by themselves, especially the visa renewal problems and conflict in the work environment.

Suggestion from this Study:

1. Suggestions for Policy Making Institutions. Suggestions for the institutions that are responsible for foreign work force are as follows:

1.1 Visa Renewal. The unnecessary visa renewal processes should be cut down especially for the ASEAN countries. The documents needed to be attached with the renewal

should be listed clearly. Policies or regulations should not be changed frequently and if the changes were made, they should be promptly announced to the institutions that have foreign employees.

1.2 Professional License to Work in Thailand. The test should be taken in English with the condition that the foreigners will only work with foreign clients.

2. Suggestions for the Hospitals that Hire Foreign Staff

2.1 The hospital should improve their work system to be more standardized and more professional regarding job descriptions, expectations, and work load. Also, rules and regulations should be clearly explained to the foreigners. Problems should be promptly addressed and solved. The foreign employees should be directly under the director of the hospital who can made decisions if the foreigners raise their awareness of issues related to work.

2.2 The hospitals should provide a seminar or conference for Thai employees and foreign employees about cultural differences and sensitivities. Moreover, both Thai and foreigners should be encouraged to respect and treat each other equally. Reflection about situations or issues might be needed; therefore, the opinions from discussion could be used to improve professional work environment and work system.

2.3 The hospitals should provide a visa renewal service and pay the fees for foreign employees. The hospitals should regularly update the information about the process of visa renewal and issues, so that, they can complete the process effectively.

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