

International Relocation: Things to Consider

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With the expansion of markets and diluting of the national borders in business sense, employees with international experience, or willing to acquire it are becoming more important for the companies. In many cases, organisations prefer to resolve issues through short-term international trips, however longer-term assignments, generally two to three years long, are still a widely used option. International assignments are used for transferring of skills and expertise, filling posts where local staff has no or limited qualifications and for start-up operations, providing development opportunities and encouraging employees to develop global outlook.

Obviously, individuals, applying for or being offered an international assignment, need to have appropriate skills, relevant experience and value to the company to secure an international move within an organization. When selecting employees it would not be correct to assume that if the candidate was performing well in the home country, the same will apply for overseas. Rather, those who are learning oriented and enjoy new experiences and challenge are more suitable for international position and are more likely to succeed in it.

When offered an international assignment, there are a few things to consider before making the move:

- Location
- Length of assignment
- Relocation policy
- Expatriate life and repatriation

Location

If given a choice, the location decision is made either based on what is best for the career and what is best for personal reasons. The best career option will very much depend on the firm. For global multinationals there are certainly some locations that are more "hot" than others. Hot markets are for instance fast growing large markets like China, India, Russia, Brazil or large and mature markets like US, Germany, UK, Japan.

The beginners in “international career” are generally less selective in their location choices, since they need experience to know what to look for and what to avoid, and their preferences are mainly based on personal rather than professional reasons.

However the organisations must balance the personal preferences with company’s needs and still fill vacancies in less desired locations. In some cases, though, there are volunteers for “hardship” locations, provided there are career or financial incentives such as hardship allowances, home-flights or additional holidays.

Length of Assignment

The first relocation is usually done only with this move in plan. Depending on the company’s objectives the assignment could be from several months to several years. Generally for training purposes employees are sent to a certain location for the period from one to six months. Assignments up to one year can have an objective of resolving a certain problem or issue, like improving relations with external suppliers, re-organisation in a department and others. Longer-term assignments, up to 3-5 years, are given to set up company’s operations abroad, for restructuring or simply to manage an important market.

Organisations also have a set of regulations in place to make sure their employees spend optimal amount of time in a given location, after which they may be offered to return to a home country or to move to another one depending on their performance and company’s goals.

If an assignment is longer than 3 years the manager and firm need to ask themselves whether the person is still an expatriate. The learning curve is clearly starting to flatten out. The person could probably develop more by moving to the next assignment, and the firm could save costs by recruiting a local manager or ask the expatriate to go on a local contract if he wants to stay.

Relocation Policy and Decision

Many international companies understand the importance of having relocation programs tailored to the personal needs of their staff in order to ensure their smooth entering in the expatriate community, as well as the success of the assignment.

Employees under 30 years old tend to be more mobile and more open to opportunities to work in a different country and environment. What they look for is experience, challenge, growth and career progression. In this group majority of the employees, who would be willing to relocate, do not have a family. To this group companies should provide a policy that includes provision for accommodation (home or apartment), as well as an assignment promising personal and career growth. Express language courses and cultural guidelines helping to get around the unfamiliar country are also very useful.

For the employees between 30 and 50 years old the crucial role in possible relocations plays company’s provision for their family since it is important for them to balance career advancement and family happiness. The support of the family is very critical to successful performance of the relocated employee, therefore companies would need to provide policies that would assist with rental or purchase of a home, support in finding school for children and career advising for spouses.

In the over-50's group there are rarely employees who relocate for the first time, since this group is already nearing their retirement and their main concerns are their retirement and their family. To these employees companies need to offer sound retirement programs and support for their families.

When talking to expatriate managers or to global mobility professionals, the answer is always the same: The major risk of expatriation is that the family does not adjust to the new location. It is strongly advised, that the spouse visits the new location and the local school, and that living circumstances are investigated carefully before a final decision to relocate is made.

Expatriate Life

When considering an international relocation individuals need to concentrate not only on professional issues, but also on personal: integration into the new culture and community. Expatriate life is quite different from the environment in the home country. It presumes new language (in most cases), new culture, way of behaving and thinking. Those who were able to accept and adapt to the local culture and behaviour find it very rewarding since it enriches their lives, knowledge and understanding of the world, at the same time making them more open-minded and tolerant towards other people and cultures. It is a very rare opportunity for an individual to live in a new environment, share the knowledge and traditions with the hosts, understand local history and value the culture.

Repatriation

Unexpectedly for many expatriates coming back to home country can become a shock, especially to the ones who have been able to make their host country a temporary home. Usually their move back is regarded as something natural and it is expected that they will return to "normal" way of life as soon as they are back home.

However returning home means changing lifestyle, sometimes also climate, re-adopting the home country's way of life; on a career side it also means changes in organisation environment and ways of communication, sometimes lack of opportunity to use the valuable skills and experience acquired abroad. Therefore some multinational companies have counselling programs to provide support for their repatriated employees and families.

It is also important to understand, that in many cases repatriation to the same company would not be an option, since the person has developed a lot during the international assignment and the organisation will have difficulties placing him or her. The repatriated employee, though, will have many other options with all the new skills and international experience.

The repatriation success statistics are terrible by any standard and there is no silver bullet. Both the manager and the employer must be realistic and pragmatic upfront. For both sides it should make sense to go for the expatriation, even if the repatriation does not work.

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