



SET EXPATS UP FOR SUCCESS

BY RENSIA MELLES

The majority of expatriates are executives who take foreign assignments at their employers' request. They're generally well compensated in exchange for temporarily pulling up stakes.

But money isn't enough. Employers shouldn't underestimate the adjustment involved in relocating. To improve the odds of a successful posting, companies must assist expats before, during and after the transition. The investment is worthwhile: expats return home with a more international mindset and stronger cross-cultural skills—crucial traits in today's globalized economy.

Choose the Right Employees

Even if employees have excelled at home, they may not necessarily succeed with foreign assignments. Sociable, flexible and inquisitive people are more likely to remain emotionally healthy while living abroad, so international companies should look for these traits. If spouses or partners are in the picture, companies should determine if they have the life skills to cope with the stress of either accompanying expats overseas or being separated during the assignment.

To determine whether employees and their partners are emotionally fit to live and work abroad, employers can use specialized third parties to conduct assessment interviews or provide employees with online assessment tools. This feedback offers companies insight into possible challenges and helps employees and their partners decide whether to move.

In addition, if employees have children who will also relocate, ensure the host country has the resources to meet their educational, health and extracurricular needs. Child concerns are common reasons for refusals and failures of expat assignments.

How to Help Expats

Employers must ensure expats and their families know what they'll go through once they move.

Once the honeymoon phase is over, expats and their families struggle to adapt to cultural differences. In this phase, expats may need to unlearn behaviours that were successful back home. For instance, someone who considered himself friendly and outgoing may get rebuffed in a new country. Smiling at strangers and direct eye contact are inappropriate in some cultures.

The third phase is full-on culture shock, when the risk of abandoning the foreign assignment is highest. As the expat goes through adapting to all the nuances of the new environment, fatigue and resentment build. The way things are done back home feels logical, so the expat inevitably asks why people in the host country can't do things the "right" way. The coffee tastes strange, the taps

work differently and nothing seems to operate the way it should.

During this stage, companies should provide employees and their families with education on cultural differences and adaptation. Access to counsellors with cross-cultural expertise can also help expats deal with culture shock.

In-house mentors and access to expat communities can offer further assistance. These sources provide emotional support, as well as practical advice and resources about housing, schools, shopping, education and healthcare.


In the fourth stage, expats find their comfort zone. Living in the host country becomes the new normal.

But, when the assignment ends, expats inevitably experience the last phase—the reverse culture shock of returning home.

Supporting the reintegration of expats should start as soon as they leave their home country. Employers can help expats stay in touch with developments back home by keeping them on home country distribution lists for company newsletters. They should also help expats stay in touch with colleagues back home.

Without proper support, expats will feel their home offices don't take enough advantage of their new experiences.

Offset these feelings by having career-planning discussions with employees as soon as their foreign assignments end. Repatriation coaching can also help expats reintegrate in a place that doesn't quite feel like home anymore.

Even the most independent and flexible people can find it hard to live away from home. Companies that want top performances from expat employees need to do more than just book the trip and wish them good luck. 

Rensia Melles is manager of global solutions with Morneau Shepell. rmelles@morneaushepell.com

SNAPSHOT OF *expat life*

10% OF EXPAT employee and family assistance program (EFAP) cases are at high risk of assignment failure

ABOUT 20% OF expat EFAP users report couple and relationship problems

ALMOST 50% OF the counselling requests occur during the first year of the assignment

Source: Stats on expat employees around the globe serviced by Morneau Shepell from 2013 and 2014