

How to improve assignment success rates

The failure rate of international assignments is known to be relatively high – 40% on average according to various studies done by Mercer and Brookfield Global Relocation Service¹⁾ in the past few years – but varies considerably according to the length and type of the assignment, the timing and the destination. As international assignments are, generally speaking, very costly, their failure, defined as early repatriation, unmet objectives or employees leaving the company within a short timespan after returning from the assignment, have a strong negative impact on the company's business performance.

What can be done to minimize the rate of early returns and to facilitate the expatriate's and the family's integration into the host destination's work and social life. In the following article we identify the **main reasons for assignment failure** and look at **ways of improving the chances of assignment success**.

Insufficient selection standards

Too often, selections of candidates for international assignments are made for the wrong reasons and some assignments are doomed from the start. Thus, the best technical expert in a particular field in the home country may be ill prepared to manage a team in a foreign culture if the person does not have the necessary people skills and the personality traits which are important for international assignments, such as the ability to work independently, perseverance and resilience in the face of obstacles, tolerance and respect for people and customs that seem strange or unfamiliar, flexibility and willingness and ability to learn the language of the host country.

Special attention needs to be paid to issues of gender, ethnicity, race or sexual orientation. Today diversity is high on companies' agenda and great efforts are made through policies and measures to avoid offending or putting at a disadvantage any specific group of people. But this does not mean that all destinations are open to employees of any race, creed or color. For instance, there are currently 76 countries where homosexuality is illegal²⁾, 10 of which with laws providing for the death penalty, at least on paper. Countries prohibiting homosexuality include top expatriate destinations such as Russia, Saudi Arabia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Quite obviously in these countries, members of the LGBT (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender) community cannot live the life they might be used to in a more liberal country, let alone bring their partner, even if legally married in the home country.

Cases where employees are sent to a trendy location as a perk to reward good performance can also cause problems, as the assignment might be perceived as a semi-vacation when in reality the work is harder than the one left behind in the home country. We know of an expatriate from a very structured and regulated home country who was transferred to Curaçao. There is a particular spirit (pun intended) in Curaçao with a drink of the same name. The Caribbean flair led the expatriate to believe that other priorities prevail there and he was very excited about the transfer. In reality, the host company was looking for somebody very structured, determined and committed to build up and grow the business. Needless to say, with the expatriate making only a minimal work effort, the assignment fell short and the assignee had to be sent home.

It is important to take time to select the right candidate. Some assignments are simply not possible, as the cultures of the two countries are not compatible. It is not discriminatory or biased to not send employees to culturally incompatible countries. On the contrary, the company is protecting them by not sending them there. It is therefore of utmost importance to pre-select possible candidates BEFORE offering an international assignment.

Insufficient support

Many expatriates are experts in their field and this is often the reason why they have been offered the opportunity of an international assignment in the first place. Because of this expert status, they are often met with exaggerated respect in the host country and, for fear of being irreverent, the new colleagues do not provide advice on local customs and business practices or correct the expatriate's behavioral mistakes. As a consequence, the expatriate may feel isolated in the new workplace. If in addition, the expatriate is not kept informed about new developments in the home office, the sense of being cut off is complete.

One measure to counteract the expatriate's sense of isolation is to assign a mentor. A mentor may be a person higher up in the hierarchy or someone who is or was also an expatriate and can facilitate the expatriate's entry into the particular market or business environment. Thanks to modern video conferencing technology, such mentorship can start before the physical start of the assignment.

Also, expatriates need to receive the usual introductory training just as if they were a new recruitment so they can fully familiarize themselves with the new work environment.

The current fashion seems to state that beards are in. Whereas this might be valid for some countries, it might not be valid for others. For example, a very senior expat who is wearing a full-grown beard may not understand that in certain countries only clean shaven men are considered as serious and trustworthy, and thus lacks support right from the start without having done anything wrong.

The same may be applicable for body language. In some countries, when you put your hands on your hips, you are seen as pushy and opinionated. Equally, in some countries it is respectful to NOT look directly into the other person's eyes, in some particularly when speaking to women, whereas in other countries the exact opposite is true. Since body language is something intrinsic, it is not easy at all to control and change it. So it is a valuable advice to pay attention to such details, have somebody inform you upfront and possibly give you feedback in the host country.

Responsibility and work overload

With the expatriate allowances and benefits, the host and sometimes also the the home country unit see the expatriate as a high cost and expect corresponding payback. The expatriate is therefore given high responsibility and a workload that is difficult to handle for anyone, but in particular for an expatriate who first needs to get used to the new environment. In addition, the expatriate's perception of the package offered might differ from the employer's viewpoint. Understandably for economic reasons, companies tend to send their expatriates on conservative packages which leave little room for additional purchasing power. As a result, the expatriate may feel that he/she is giving more than he/she is receiving.

Significant differences in working habits between home and host countries (e.g. long working hours in Asian countries, Sunday through Thursday work week in Middle East countries) can be very trying for expatriates and in extreme cases lead to burnout. Japan for instance has a reputation of long work days and strong devotion to one's company. There is even a term in the Japanese language "Karoshi" that refers to death by overworking in the workplace. People sleep on the subway and this is regarded as normal if not admirable as the person seems to be working very hard and thus is overly tired. Although, meanwhile, the younger generations are less willing to dedicate their free time to the company and the government has acknowledged that there is a serious problem in the country, with its very high burnout and suicide rates (one of the highest in the world)³⁾, putting in long hours is still very ingrained in the culture and the shift to more work-life balance is gradual.

Inability of the expatriate and family to adjust

The move to a new country is stress for all family members. Depending on the home-host country combination, the local language, customs and food might be unknown. We have already touched on the necessity of the proper business preparation for the expat, but the same is valid also for the adjustment of both the expatriate and his/her whole family to the new social environment.

The concept of intercultural training is well known and should be the first step to help the expatriate and family to understand what is expected. Such training does not only inform about the host country's cultural standards but also points out the differences of that culture to the expatriate's own. This is particularly important so that the expatriate and family are already prepared for possible differences and how to overcome them.

Dual career issues may prove to be very difficult and render some assignments impossible, for instance in cases where the expatriate's partner has an occupation in a very restricted field such as legal or medical where the knowledge tends to be very country specific and/or subject to official certifications. But even in cases where the partner is prepared to temporarily give up his/her career problems often arise, as most partners wish to take the job up again once they have returned to their home country. In order to do so, they need to keep updated on the developments in their field and in their country. In such cases, spousal support can prove vital to both the partner and indirectly to the expat and the assignment abroad.

Such preparation can make the difference in the expatriate's and the family's adjustment to the host country and the ultimate success of an international assignment.

Have we made you curious about these issues? Are you perhaps struggling with certain aspects of your mobility program? Have you had failed assignments and possibly been asked about analyzing the reasons behind it?

We at OneExpatServices have ample experience in creating, supporting and securing the success of international mobility programs.

Contact us via our website: www.OneExpatServices.com

- 1) Sources: various publications by Mercer and Brookfield Global Relocation Service
- 2) <https://76crimes.com/76-countries-where-homosexuality-is-illegal/>
- 3) <http://www.economist.com/news/business/21708721-new-report-shows-how-badly-japan-needs-labour-reform-overdoing-it> (attention: you might need to pay a fee for reading this article)