



WELCOME BACK

You sent your employees overseas—will you be there to welcome them back when they return?

As the economy becomes increasingly global, employers are slowly recognizing the value of individuals who have worked overseas. Yet, remarkably, the same companies that offer employees the chance to gain valuable international experience in overseas assignments often fail to retain those employees when they return home.

"About 50 percent of repats leave their companies within two years of repatriation," says Michael McCallum, international chair of the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) Area I Leadership Committee and national director of business development and training consultant for HR for Berlitz International Inc. in Princeton, N.J.

What's behind the poor retention rates? Experts say most companies do a lousy job of repatriating employees. "Many HR people think all it consists of is moving household goods and making travel arrangements," says McCallum.

By Andrea C. Poe

McCallum's views are supported by the International Assignee Research Project, a recent joint study by Berlitz International and the Institute for International Human Resources (IIHR). The study found that 77 percent of international transferees received no career counseling from their employers upon their return from abroad; only 6 percent were offered re-entry training.

Failure to provide such repatriation assistance can be an expensive mistake. "You want to capitalize on the investment you're making" in employees, says Terry Hogan, vice president of client services for Cendant International Assignment Services in Danbury, Conn. "You don't want them to take what they've gained from the experience and bring it to a competitor."

Yet, by failing to ease the transition for repats, many employers make it

easy for these employees to leave. For some employers, the problem may be that repatriation may simply fail to appear on their radar screens. While most HR professionals recognize that employees need help preparing to leave for an overseas assignment, it may be less obvious that those same employees might need help returning to once-familiar surroundings.

As a result, some companies may put more effort into expatriation than repatriation. Yet, "Repatriation is harder than expatriation," says Carol Jones, regional director of international assignment services for Deloitte & Touche LLP, in St. Louis, Mo. "People don't expect to have to adjust to home, but that is precisely what makes it so difficult. After being gone for several years, the assignee is facing a world of changes—personally, culturally and professionally. The culture shock is real," she says.

Easing that shock is certainly within HR's purview and abilities, but it takes planning. ➤



Early Planning

One of the keys to effective repatriation is to start early—before employees ever leave for their overseas assignments.

“Planning for repatriation should begin the day of selection,” maintains Carolyn Gould, who handles international assignments for PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC), based in Florham Park, N.J.

Yet few companies take action this early in the process. In fact, only 17 percent of companies discuss repatriation prior to an employee's departure, according to the 1999 *Global Relocation Trends* survey sponsored by Windham International, the National Foreign Trade Council and the IIHR.

That's unfortunate because good up-front communication is key to developing a successful repatriation process and maintaining low attrition rates. Early on, HR needs to set the stage for the repatria-

they're doing for the company and why it's important,” says Malou Roth, vice president of human resources for training and development.

Jones agrees that such encouragement is vital. “To ensure that assignees feel validated and will remain with the company, it's critical to communicate that—regardless of the repatriation position—the company values their newly acquired knowledge,” she explains.

Before departure, it's also important to plan what types of positions employees will have when they return, says Jones. It may be impossible to guarantee a specific position to an assignee upon her return, so you may need to practice what Jones calls “expectation management,” which requires HR to be as open and honest as possible.

“Many assignees expect that an assignment

company and colleagues are weakened, they will need to be re-established when the employee returns.

A better solution is to keep close ties while employees are on assignment. “You should employ a variety of vehicles,” maintains Gould. One way is to include pictures of expats and updates on their work in company newsletters so they maintain visibility, she says.

Or you can keep expats on company mailing lists so they don't lose touch with what's happening on the domestic front, Hogan suggests.

Another way to be sure expats aren't completely cut off is to assign them a mentor, says Gould. That's what PWC does. For example, Gould

Paying for Staying

Noticing that a lack of opportunity for repats was contributing significantly to its 28 percent attrition rate, AT&T redesigned its repatriation policy in the early 1990s. Now, a hefty bonus is given to repats who stay on for half a year after they return. Responsibility is also placed on their original departments to create an opportunity for them within six months. If a department fails to do this, HR may place the employees elsewhere—but the department must pay the bonus to the repat. The company now has an expat attrition rate of less than 10 percent.

tion process by ensuring that employees understand the value of their upcoming overseas assignments and that they have the company's full support.

That's the cornerstone of the repatriation process at Molex Inc., a Lisle, Ill.-based manufacturer of interconnection systems. “Before they go, they're really made to understand what it is

abroad will mean a promotion when they return—and it can,” Jones says. If it doesn't, she warns, tell employees—prior to their departure—to expect a lateral move. That way, there will be no unpleasant surprises when they return.

Keeping in Touch

While on assignment, expats may start to lose touch with the company and their co-workers. If these bonds to the

has an associate who is being sent to Singapore for a few years. “She's somebody who I really want to come back, so I'm going to do everything I can to keep contact up while she's away,” Gould says. “An expat needs an anchor back home.”

McCallum agrees that assigning a mentor is a good idea, but he suggests that this role be filled by line managers. “They can help guide the expats' careers and keep them connected to what's going on back home,” he says. “People who were former expats themselves make really great mentors,” he adds. ■

Roth argues that HR, not line managers, must take the reins and keep the expat connected. "If you're expecting a line manager to keep up contact with the expats, you're crazy. The person has just left their department and they probably aren't too happy about it," she says. "Besides, you don't want to burden them with that responsibility."

Roth says most of Molex's expats call in regularly. The few who don't call in get phone calls from the HR department, which checks in to touch base with them.

Telephoning is a great idea, but how do you stay in touch when the employee is many time zones away? "Use e-mail," suggests McCallum. That's what 35 percent of HR departments do with expats, according to the *Global Relocation Trends* survey.

Another way to keep expats connected to the home office is to require them to use their home leave allowance to come home so they can network and reconnect with colleagues. "Some assignees use the allowance for trips and then are shocked when they come home and nobody knows them," Gould says.

Putting in face time also is important for HR and other managers, says Roth. She visits expats while abroad and encourages other employees to do the same. "Maybe it's because we're a small company with fewer than 100 expats, but when our employees go abroad they want to meet up with the expats and catch up," she notes.

Cendant has another way of keeping employees connected. It creates a "team huddle"—a group of employees who work on a particular client. It may be a virtual team with some

members in the home office and others in foreign locations, but wherever they are it's the group's responsibility to stay in touch. Hogan believes it's a model that would work for most companies. "Companies would really benefit from a multicultural global workforce team like we have," she says.

In addition to their team, expats have another resource they can use to

stay in touch: Hogan herself. "They have a direct line to the vice president, something they might not have had if they were in the home office," she adds.

Opportunities

Fear of being left out of the loop fuels anxiety for expats. In fact, the *Global Relocation Trends* survey reports that 50 percent of expats are unsure how

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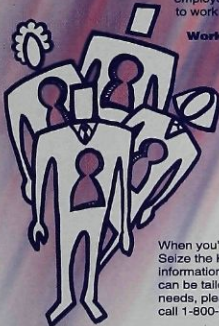
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their international assignment will affect their careers.

"HR needs to keep expats on the radar so that when opportunities come up, managers think of them," says Gould. After all, an engineer in Dubuque may be reluctant to uproot his family and go to Saudi Arabia unless he knows that he won't be overlooked when he returns.

HR also can be an advocate for those who are abroad. When openings occur for which an expat is ideally suited, the HR department should lobby on behalf of that person, says Roth. "I see myself as a Hollywood agent—I push the talent," she says. "HR doesn't create the jobs, but it can match the people with the openings."

Using the Experience

One of the main reasons repatriated employees grow dissatisfied with their jobs after they return is that they feel their new skills and experiences aren't being put to use.

According to the *Global Relocation Trends* survey, 76 percent of companies say that providing opportunities to

use foreign experience is the most effective way to safeguard against repatriates leaving the company prematurely.

"If you had someone transferred to Germany, when that person comes back you should try to put them on a German client so they can use what they've learned," Gould recommends. ▀



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Roth adds, "Even if they don't use that experience directly, once they're home, HR needs to let them know it was valuable because now they understand non-American customers and markets, which is a big plus."

Another way to use the international experiences of employees is to solicit their input on global issues. "Put them on special task forces or committees that use their recently acquired business acumen," Jones suggests.

Companies that fail to take advantage of the know-how of expats risk losing them. A former expat himself, McCallum once returned from a three-year overseas assignment to find that his company wasn't tapping into his

new expertise. Within three months of returning, he had a new job.

"I didn't expect to change companies like that," he says. "I just wasn't happy because I wasn't using my experience."

Shifting Roles

Another reason repats grow dissatisfied is because they experience a shift in roles. Most foreign assignments offer greater autonomy to expats. But when they return to a large corporate environment, they are no longer top dog.

To address these issues, HR should work with managers to find places where repatriated employees can exercise their ability to work independently or lead teams. "Find a position for

them that gives them a role that they've shown they excel at," Gould says.

There also is the issue of corporate culture shock. It can be difficult adjusting to American corporate structures after working in another business climate for several years. "When you work in Latin America, you have to adapt to a highly controlled, hierarchical environment," says McCallum, who was an expat in Brazil. "When you come back to the U.S., you're faced with an environment where information is decentralized and employees are 'empowered.' The work styles are so different that going to work can be horrible."

To mitigate this, he recommends repatriation counseling. "It won't

Every so often, technology comes along with something so much better, so much more flexible, everything else is just history.

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change the experience, but it will give returning assignees an awareness that what they're going through is normal," he says.

Defining Success

Just what is a successful repatriation program? To a certain degree success is quantifiable. Attrition rates are a good measure of general success or failure. If repatriated employees bolt

within a couple of years of their return, you can be pretty sure there's room for improvement.

However, just because employees stick around doesn't necessarily mean that the repatriation program is successful, experts caution. Look at what kinds of contributions employees make upon their return. Find out whether they'd do another stint abroad for the company. See if other employees in the company are eager for expat assignments or if they view them as dead-end posts. These are the types of information that help HR professionals determine how well a repatriation program is working.

The most successful program will be one where repatriation is taken as

seriously as expatriation. "You're in for a penny, you're in for a pound," Hogan says. "You're making a huge investment in these employees when you send them on [foreign] assignments. You should protect your investment by having an eye toward what you're going to do when they return."

And who better to do that than HR? "You were there when you shipped them off," Roth says. "You should be there for them on the other end, too." ■

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