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GLOBAL



Considering an Expat Assignment?

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President of large manufacturing firm: What happened with our European operation? We started with a great business plan. Michael was in charge, he's had a great track record in the U.S., but these numbers are terrible!

Vice president of the same firm: It looks like Michael wasn't the right person for the job. But I can't figure out how he could go so wrong? It's such a waste to have to pull him out of there after only 18 months...

Expatriate Challenges

Many a global operation has floundered because the wrong individual was at the helm. Too often, the selection criteria for who is sent abroad is simply whoever has the necessary business skills or is available or willing to go. But just because the business requirements are a good match for a given candidate does not mean that this candidate will do well in a different country.

In addition to the requisite technical skills, successful foreign managers must have the ability to build relationships across cultures and act as a coach and mentor (see Figure 1, page 33). Often, however, they are expected to work under very unrealistic timelines. They are working for people in the home office who have no appreciation for the realities of where they are, what it takes to be effective or how long it takes to get anything done on the

ground. According to recent surveys, about 20% of all expatriate assignments fail, which means that the expat returned home prematurely – either for personal reasons or because he or she is recalled by the head office – and the stated business objectives for the assignment were not met.

The mental, emotional and psychological challenges of adjusting to a new culture and work environment are often greater than either the company or the expatriate expects. In addition to the very real consequences of culture shock (see below) – or perhaps *because* of culture shock – stress, burnout and family troubles all too often seem to accompany the expatriate assignment. Of the above 20% of “failed assignments,” it is estimated that approximately 60% of them are due to family-related difficulties.

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Stress and Family Problems...

Many expatriates are asked to travel extensively, perhaps back to home offices in North America or Europe. This, plus the ever-present strain of work in a wholly new environment, can take its toll. Expatriates and spouses must be ever vigilant for the telltale signs of stress: irritability, mood swings, depression, excessive drinking and insomnia—to name a few.

Figure 2. Culture Shock and Phases of Cultural Adaptation

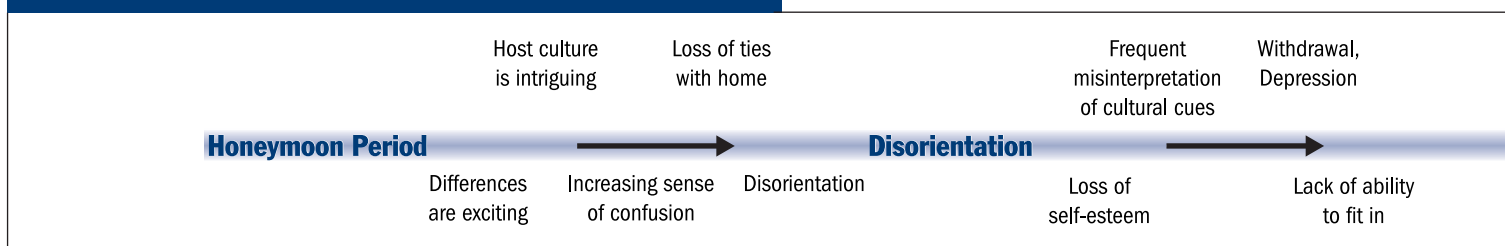


Figure 1. Comments on Expatriate Managers

The following is a sample of comments from employees who have worked for foreign managers:

Attitude

"I've seen foreign managers come in with a superior attitude. They say, 'we've got the best ways. Your ways are old and no good.' This will not be accepted, and believe me, if the organization doesn't want to accept them, they cannot survive. These managers will be cut off completely. They will not be given information; they will not be included. We will find ways of undermining what they are doing..." An employee in Ireland

Flexibility

"The foreign manager needs to be a person who is very flexible and adaptable; he needs to be able to learn and adjust to the environment quickly; he can't only stick to the ways that things are done at headquarters..." An employee in Taiwan

"You can't be one of those ivory tower dictators, ones who just discharge orders. The foreign manager has to be willing to roll up his sleeves, get in there, rally the team, encourage them and always be there with them..." An employee in Finland

Relationship and Coaching Skills

"You can do an immense amount of damage by bringing in a very capable person who doesn't know how to build relationships..." An employee in China

"In my last job the expatriate they sent was just a technical expert. He did not have any experience whatsoever in managing people, and that was a big mistake..." An employee in Mexico

"Basically, the expatriate is a teacher and a coach from day one. And that should be his primary job because he should be looking to replace himself within a few years with a local person..." An employee in the U.K.

In addition, while the expat is likely to be immersed in the demands of his or her job on a day-to-day basis, it is the spouse and children that often have the greatest difficulties adjusting to a different way of life. For the children, this may be the first time that they have experienced being a minority or significantly "different" from

other children. For the non-working spouse, issues of identity exist as well. "How can I develop my personal life in my new home? How can I make friends? With whom will I make friends? What is in this environment that meets my recreational, educational or social needs?"

It is important for the spouse and children to find other people who have intimate knowledge of the new country as well as real insights into the trials and tribulations of the expatriate experience. Otherwise, as one expat spouse put it so poignantly, "the walls seem to move in an inch every day as we sit in our room overlooking this foreign city in which we are supposedly living."

Culture Shock...

No one should underestimate the impact of culture shock on both the expat and his or her family. Culture shock is a state of disorientation and frustration that results from entering a

new culture where people's fundamental values, beliefs and ways of doing things are different from your own. Common symptoms of culture shock include: irritability, anxiety, excessive sleeping or reading, depression, increasing isolation, compulsive eating or drinking, resentment or bitterness, feelings of helplessness and physical problems such

as headaches, insomnia and sickness.

For expatriates arriving in a new culture, there is often a "honeymoon" period, during which everything new seems interesting and exciting (see Figure 2, page 32). This is typically followed by an increasing sense of disorientation as deeper, more fundamental differences surface. A newcomer may have difficulty fitting in and may become increasingly isolated from colleagues in the new culture, while at the same time he or she may start to lose touch with home culture contacts. This is the stage where many people become depressed and may be prone to stereotyping or venting about the host culture.

In a successful expatriate assignment, however, the expat and his or her family will learn how to survive in their new environment and develop coping mechanisms. Hopefully, as time goes by, their level of comfort and confidence will increase and they will begin to appreciate their life in a new culture.

Coping Strategies

The following are some tips for dealing with culture shock and other common expat challenges:

Before You Leave

- If your company offers pre-departure orientation or cross-cultural training, take advantage of it. An introduction to the culture, history, language and business customs of this new country is invaluable. If you are going to be relocating with your family, your family members should also be involved in the cross-cultural orientation.
- Talk with expatriates who have



returned from your destination culture before you move there. Ask questions about housing, schooling, medical care, social life, etc.

- Check to see if your company has put together an expatriate manual for people moving to your destination country.
- It is important to learn what to expect—both in terms of the job assignment itself as well as the living situation. Make sure you understand everything about the package before you leave. Take the responsibility to clarify.
- One of the major reasons for the early return of an expatriate is that the family has adjustment problems. It is important to discuss how the move may affect the family. Personal time available to spend with one's family may change. Other family-related assumptions need to be carefully investigated. For example, the availability of childcare or the opportunities for a spouse to find work in the host culture.

After You Arrive

- Have a plan for acclimatizing yourself to your new culture. For example, set goals and identify two or three activities per week that will help you to learn more about the culture or your new environment.
- Take language lessons if necessary.
- Find people who can act as "buddies" and show you around.
- Stay in touch with friends and family by Internet.
- Make sure your family is established first. Allow extra time during the first month (and possibly longer) to provide both emotional and practical support. If you have a non-working spouse at home with young children, his or her experience

will be quite different from yours. You will have your work, your identity and your support group at work, while your spouse may be fairly isolated and will have to deal with many of the realities of day-to-day living in a foreign language and culture.

- There are pros and cons to getting in touch with the expatriate community when you arrive in your host country.



“THE WALLS SEEM TO MOVE IN AN INCH EVERY DAY AS WE SIT IN OUR ROOM OVERLOOKING THIS FOREIGN CITY IN WHICH WE ARE SUPPOSEDLY LIVING.”

If you are with your family, it can be particularly beneficial for your spouse to connect with other foreign spouses. On the other hand, if one limits one's interactions to other expatriates, many opportunities for cultural learning and adaptation may be missed.

- It is helpful to make friends with local colleagues and local people outside the workplace. They will be a valuable source of information on how to get by in the local community. Establishing connections outside of the expatriate community will also enrich your experience abroad.
- Try to refrain from making cultural comparisons. Recognize that your new environment is different, and be open to adapting.

- Maintain a good sense of humor. You may suddenly find yourself feeling incompetent in many areas in which you normally excel, so it's healthy to be able to laugh at yourself.
- Have patience—not only with family members and locals with whom you interact, but also with yourself. Things may happen in different ways and at a different pace from that to which you are accustomed. To some extent, you will need to “go with the flow” to make things work.
- Have a sense of adventure. Don't be afraid to try new things.

Repatriation

People who have spent a significant length of time living or working in a foreign country sometimes find that the readjustment to their home culture upon their return is even more difficult than the initial adjustment to the foreign culture. Part of the reason for this may be that this “re-entry shock” is unanticipated—why should one have difficulty adjusting to one's own culture?

There are many possible causes, which may include losing touch with one's home office, colleagues, friends or family members. During the time that an expatriate has spent abroad, time has not stopped for professional and personal associates. There will be many experiences (both the expatriate's and his or her colleagues, friends and family) that will not be shared, and many may even be difficult to communicate.

In addition, expatriates may have become accustomed, in varying degrees, to their host culture's way of doing things and they may experience discomfort upon returning home. For example, if an expatriate has been living in an extremely safe country, he or she may feel relatively insecure after returning home. Also, some expatriates



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have a much higher standard of living when they are living abroad, and must readjust to “reality” after their return.

Some Tips for Managing or Dealing with “Re-entry Shock”

- Have discussions before you begin your overseas assignment regarding what will happen at its conclusion. Try to align expectations with your management about how the assignment fits into your overall career path.
- Make a conscious effort to stay in touch with your home office during your overseas assignment. Frequent e-mail and telephone communication as well as periodic visits home can help you to maintain your visibility in the home office.
- During your overseas assignment, stay in touch with personal friends and family members—perhaps by having them visit you so that they can experience a bit of what your life is like. Share your experiences (by letter, e-mail, photos, etc.) so that when you return, the “gap” will not be as wide.

- After returning home, stay in touch with the colleagues (both personal and professional) that you came to know in your host country.
- Find a way to utilize the knowledge you gained during your overseas assignment, either by being involved in business with that country or by helping to orient future assignees to that country.

Strategies Used by Successful Expatriates

There are indeed challenges to an expatriate assignment. Managers and executives considering expat assignments need to consider the psychological and family adjustments that will be necessary if they are to be successful in their foreign assignment. They also need to consider how they will return home, and should discuss with their management how this assignment fits in with their career path.

While these issues are important, the foreign assignment can also be a wonderful learning experience. A

growing number of expats have great adventures abroad, and the following is a compilation of strategies that many have found useful:

1. Manage the expectations of yourself and your family.
2. View your new life as an adventure.
3. Make your house a “home” with pictures and familiar items that make you feel comfortable.
4. Get involved in the expatriate community.
5. Be proactive in exploring the area; get to know your neighborhood.
6. Acknowledge culture shock and its impact—remember that it is normal.
7. Establish a daily routine for life the way you want to live it.
8. Live one day at a time.
9. Develop new friendships with other expats *and* with locals.
10. Find someone outside of your family to whom you can express your frustrations.
11. Get into an exercise routine.
12. Plan an all-day or weekend excursion out of the city.
13. Find a church or religious organization if religion is a part of your life.
14. Pursue a new hobby; develop new interests.
15. Keep a journal or diary.
16. Try to have realistic expectations of yourself.
17. Plan your next vacation—something to look forward to.
18. Above all, keep a sense of humor. 🌐

The content on culture shock is partially adapted from International Business: A Basic Guide for Women, Tracey Wilen. Xlibris Publishing, March 2001. It is also a part of the GlobeSmart Webtool.

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