

Repatriation & culture

Returning home after the conclusion of an international assignment can be as difficult or even more so than the original move abroad. It can lead to cultural disorientation, employment dissatisfaction, high turnover and a significant loss on investment to organisations.

REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

Assignees and their families will have embraced their new culture over the period of their assignment and will have adopted a different value set. This can make adaptation to their original culture both unexpected and difficult.

Reverse culture shock refers to the cycle experienced by assignees and their families on return home after an international assignment. They can experience similar feelings to those on going out: honeymoon, disenchantment, and depression before finally reaching adjustment.

Organisations should provide repatriation training that includes reverse culture shock so that people know what to expect and can prepare accordingly.

CULTURAL PREFERENCES

Assignees and their families may look forward to returning to their home culture and so are not expecting cultural disorientation. Changes may well have taken place in the home country since their departure to live and work abroad. It is important that employers ensure that individuals are kept up-to-date with any developments in their home country

while they are away. Mentor and buddy systems can be useful here.

It is possible that assignees and family members are so settled in their new culture that they do not want to return home. They may experience negative psychological effects from leaving their adopted culture which they have fully embraced. If they now have less affinity with their home country's culture, they may have difficulty reintegrating back into it.

Besides societal cultural changes, there may also have been organisational changes. The culture within the employing company may have moved on from what the assignee remembered, again creating disorientation and potentially dissatisfaction on return. Assignees may exhibit a preference for the organisational culture of the foreign operation, particularly if working there gave them greater autonomy than they originally had at home.

REPATRIATION TURNOVER

Organisations need international assignees to stay long enough to share their experiences, ensure knowledge transfer and boost cross-unit international linkages.

Typically an international assignment costs at least three times that of home country employment. If employees are unable to settle back into their home country and are dissatisfied with their organisation and decide to leave, the investment in their international transfer is lost.

CULTURAL COMPETENCIES

Organisations often fail to recognise that individuals grow personally and professionally through cultural development when they live and work abroad. When they come back, they want to be able to use this growth and

cultural understanding in their roles.

If their cultural competencies are not used, individuals become demoralised, demotivated, and they tend to leave. It is thus crucial that organisations bring the international competencies that individuals gain on assignment back into the workplace and use them effectively on repatriation.

Receiving managers in the home country should be trained to understand the cross-cultural value that repatriates bring back into the home organisation. Career path planning systems should ensure that repatriates are deployed effectively.



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