

Ensuring the Success of Expatriate Managers

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The ever-increasing growth of world trade, accompanied by saturated domestic markets and intensifying levels of competition have forced many U.S. businesses to expand their operations across national borders. Thus, despite an increasing use of host-nationals, more and more U.S. managers are being sent to live and work abroad. Currently, for example, 80 percent of midsize and large companies send personnel abroad, and 45 percent plan to increase the number they have on assignment.¹ These expatriates must often function in significantly different political, economic and cultural milieus. As a result of these differences, many expatriates have not succeeded in their overseas assignments and early cross-industry studies estimated U.S. expatriate failure, defined as premature return from an overseas assignment, at between 25 and 40 percent when the expatriate is assigned to a developed country and as high as 70 percent when assigned to a still-developing country.²

Toward a Broader Definition of Expatriate Failure

The direct costs of failure, resulting from a premature return, have been estimated to be between \$250,000 and \$1 million.³ Lately, however, there has been considerable discussion regarding the usefulness of defining expatriate failure as narrowly as "premature return." Indeed, some researchers have begun to question the notion that failure should be defined only in terms of the direct costs associated with premature returns and have begun to focus also on the indirect (invisible) costs of failure associated with those expatriates who remain in their overseas assignments, yet whose performance is judged as marginal or ineffective.⁴ Such indirect costs may take the form of loss of market share; and damaged relations with clients, local businesses and government officials. For the expatriates themselves these costs might include a loss of self-esteem, self-confidence and prestige among their peers.⁵ Furthermore, it is often the case that

future performance and family relationships may be affected by the assignment failure. It is possible, therefore, that ineffective or marginally effective expatriates who complete their assignments might cost a multinational corporation more in the long run than those expatriates who return from an assignment prematurely. Indeed, one recent report indicates that nearly one-third of expatriate managers did not perform up to the expectations of their superiors.⁶

Factors Related to Expatriate Failure

The question becomes, therefore, why do so many expatriates perform poorly and sometimes return prematurely from their assignments. To a certain extent, factors such as the level of expected performance in early stages of the assignment compared with the length of the assignment⁷ and the degree of cultural toughness will have an influence on expatriate failure, but the major factors connected with such failures seem to be that firms tend to send the *wrong people* for the *wrong reasons*; and subsequently provide them with *inadequate preparation*, *foreign support systems* and *repatriation programs*. Despite mounting experimental and anecdotal evidence with regard to the importance of these factors, most U.S. firms engaged in international business continue to perform poorly in each of these areas. The main reason for this appears to be a continuing parochialism on the part of U.S. business executives who seem to believe that modern business practices are similar enough around the world that it is not necessary to engage in special efforts in selecting, training, supporting and repatriating expatriate managers. A review of the research in each of these areas should prove useful.

The Wrong People

Based on the mistaken assumption that the rules of good business are the same everywhere, firms tend to select expatriate managers almost exclusively on the basis of technical competence, often

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demonstrated by past performance in the domestic setting.⁸ Though an important determiner of ultimate success, research evidence suggests that many management skills do not transfer from one culture to another and that the major contributing factor to expatriate failure is an *inability to adjust to the foreign culture* rather than a lack of technical competence. A manager who performs well in the domestic setting, therefore, may not be able to adapt to managing in a different cultural setting or even to living in intimate contact with members of that culture. Successful firms, therefore, are those that place a candidate's cultural adaptability, depending upon the circumstances, on a priority level at or above that of his or her technical competence.

Who, then are the right people? In addition to basic technical and managerial skills, research has identified certain traits and characteristics as predictors of expatriate success. Although having these traits does not ensure success, without them the possibility of failure has been found to be greatly enhanced. These traits include: cultural empathy, adaptability, diplomacy, language ability, a positive attitude, emotional stability and maturity.⁹ Studies of companies with successful track records indicate that they tend to seek managers who have: (1) *A drive to communicate* with the local people, (2) *Broad-based sociability* in establishing social ties with local residents, rather than sticking to a small circle of fellow expatriates, (3) *Cultural flexibility*, as characterized by a willingness to experiment with different customs, (4) *A cosmopolitan orientation*, defined as a mind-set which can intuitively understand that different cultural norms have value and meaning to those who practice them, and (5) *A collaborative negotiation style*, as opposed to one that is confrontational.¹⁰

Of importance also is a positive outlook toward the foreign assignment and a willingness to relocate. Selection should be a two-way process and those managers who are sent unwillingly are less likely to perform up to expectations than those who have an interest in the assignment.¹¹ In addition, the influence of the family, and particularly the spouse has also been well documented. Early research, for example, indicated that the *inability of the spouse to adjust* was the single most frequently cited reason for expatriate premature returns among U.S. and European firms. Yet, only about half of those companies had even included the spouse in the interviewing process.¹² Similarly, studies have found that the adjustment of the spouse is highly

correlated with the adjustment of the expatriate manager and that children tend to mirror their parents' reactions.¹³ The inability of the spouse to adjust seems to be related to a number of factors. In an international assignment it is often the spouse who is more immersed in the local culture. Whereas the expatriate manager is likely to be buffered from the local environment by the firm and the children immersed in the continuity and routine of school, the spouse must often function without the familiar network of family and friends, without adequate language skills or cultural training and without adequate support programs to assist them in developing an appropriate lifestyle while overseas. These problems have become exacerbated in recent years with a rise in the number of dual-career families and an inability of the spouse to find adequate employment in the foreign assignment. Indeed, recent research suggests that increasingly a contributing factor in the decision to turn down an overseas assignment in the first place may be the impact of that assignment on the spouse's career.¹⁴ Thus, the spouse, as well as the expatriate manager, must be willing and capable of adjusting to the foreign assignment.

Although many of these predictors of expatriate success have been identified, it remains as yet unclear exactly how these traits and characteristics should be measured. Because of the lack of validated psychological tests designed to measure these specific traits, it does not appear at this point in time that a reliance on psychological testing is the answer. Instead, successful companies use a combination of extensive *interviews* of the candidate and his or her family members, sometimes called "adaptability screening," *surveys* to rate candidates on the level of preparation for global assignments and the extent of their cross-cultural skills; and *observational techniques* of candidates in actual cross-cultural situations to determine if they possess these capabilities. In addition, a review of the family situation to uncover any potential problems should be a part of the selection process. *Family problems*, in addition to the previously mentioned factors, may include such things as: the disruption of the children's education; the care of aging or invalid parents; poor communications between parents and with children; excessive alcohol or drug use; indications of rigid and inflexible personalities or lifestyles; and custody issues in the case of divorced parents.

The Wrong Reasons

According to a recent report in the Harvard Business Review by Black and Gregersen, most companies send their managers abroad for reasons that make little long-term business sense. Far too frequently foreign assignments have been used to reward favored employees, as a dumping ground for the mediocre or to fill an immediate business need. While it is certainly true that immediate business needs cannot be ignored, successful companies view foreign assignments with a long-term perspective and are not solely concerned with just the reward factor or even just putting out brush fires. An additional problem is that very often companies consign the responsibility for expatriate selection to the human resources department. In this regard, Black and Gregersen indicate that: "Few HR managers – only 11 percent, according to our research – have ever worked abroad themselves; most have little understanding of a global assignment's unique personal and professional challenges. As a result, firms often get bogged down in the administrative minutiae of international assignments instead of capturing strategic opportunities." Companies, on the other hand, that manage their expatriates effectively make foreign assignments for two related reasons: (1) to generate and transfer knowledge, such as new methods or products, and (2) to develop their global leadership skills among their managers, or to do both.¹⁵ Indeed, other studies have recognized that for firms to advance in the internationalization process, foreign assignments are a necessary step for both firms and their managers to develop international expertise.¹⁶

Inadequate Preparation

As a further consequence of the perception that it's not necessary to make special efforts for departing expatriate managers, a large number of multinationals have been reluctant to provide even a basic level of predeparture training and development. For example, a 1989 survey of U.S. firms found that only 13 percent of respondents indicated that they would offer expatriates a predeparture program.¹⁷ Similarly, the 1997-98 Price Waterhouse survey of European firms indicated that only 13 percent of those firms surveyed provided their departing managers with cultural awareness courses, though 47 percent provided briefings for culturally "challenging" postings.¹⁸ Thus, despite mounting research evidence and wide acknowledgement of the potential benefits of predeparture training, such training is not being offered on a routine basis. Firms

most frequently cite as reasons for this lack the pervasive belief that such training is neither necessary nor effective. One recent study found further that, of those few multinationals that do offer predeparture training, only around half of these programs lasted longer than a week.¹⁹

Part of the problem also is a lack of consensus among both researchers and practitioners as to which types of training are necessary for any given set of circumstances. Though most agree that some form of *cultural awareness training* is most essential, it is also not well understood that the components of such a training program must vary according to such factors as: the cultural toughness of the assignment, the assignment's duration, the degree of interaction with host nationals, and differences in tasks to be performed on the job. Obviously business firms must utilize these factors in constructing a *contingency framework* to guide them in making decisions regarding the nature, duration and level of rigor of training.

An example of such a contingency model was one proposed by Mendenhall, Dunbar and Oddou.²⁰ This model suggests that if the expected level of interaction with host nationals is low and similarity with the manager's native culture is high, the length of training can be less than a week and firms can rely more on information-giving approaches such as: *area or cultural briefings* by way of lectures, movies or books. On the other hand, if the duration of the assignment is two to 12 months and the expected interaction with host nationals is moderate, the level of training rigor should be higher and its length longer (one to four weeks). In addition to information-giving approaches, firms should utilize more experiential training methods such as *cultural assimilators* and *role plays*, which expose trainees to the kinds of situations they are likely to encounter that are critical to successful interactions. Finally, if the manager is being sent to a fairly novel and different host culture, and if the expected degree of interaction is high, the level of cross-cultural training rigor should be high, should last as long as two months, and should be even more experiential. In addition to the methods previously discussed, *sensitivity training*, *field experiences* and *inter-cultural workshops* may be the appropriate training methods.²¹ Correspondingly, it has become increasingly clear in recent years that as the level of interaction with the host culture increases, so must the level of *language training*. Training in the host country's native language not only aids in communicating on the job, but it also

helps the manager and the spouse to adjust to the culture and interact successfully in the local environment, thus increasing the firm's level of international expertise. Finally, the 1997-98 Price Waterhouse survey reports that 53 percent of firms always provided *preliminary visits* to the overseas site as a means of orientation and training and that a further 38 percent indicated that such visits were used in certain circumstances.²²

As previously indicated, the primary reason for expatriate premature returns is related to the inability of the spouse to adjust. Because of this some firms have begun to include the trailing spouse not only in the initial selection process, but also in the kinds of orientation and training experiences mentioned above. As this process continues, ongoing research will undoubtedly justify over the long term the added expenses these programs cost international businesses upfront.

Inadequate Foreign Support Systems

A topic that is somewhat neglected in research literature, but certainly not in practitioner publications is that of providing in-country support for expatriate managers and their families while on foreign assignment. It is true that international firms have long recognized the need to establish tangible support systems in the form of *compensation and benefits packages*. These packages vary considerably but are generally set up with the following combination of objectives in mind: (1) to attract and retain staff, (2) to provide an incentive for managers to leave the home country on a foreign assignment, (3) to facilitate the transfer to the foreign location and back, (4) to maintain an acceptable standard of living in the foreign location, and finally (5) to provide the expatriate with opportunities for financial advancement through income and/or savings.²³ In addition, many firms are finding that in-country *logistical support* regarding housing, schools, grocery store shopping and so on, can significantly reduce the uncertainty associated with the foreign assignment.²⁴ The problem has been, however, that such compensation packages are often perceived by expatriates as necessary, but not sufficient support in being able to adjust to life abroad. The process of adjustment to the foreign environment involves a whole range of emotional and psychological reactions, the combination of which is an *adjustment cycle* commonly referred to as *culture shock*. Actually, research studies have found support for

three distinctly different types of adjustment: *work adjustment*, *interactions adjustment* (i.e., interacting with host nationals), and *general adjustment* to the new living environment.²⁵ Adjustment begins with predeparture selection and training, but firms that have even done a good job of selecting the right people, for the right reasons and have provided appropriate predeparture training may not be successful if they simply end involvement with their expatriates at that point and abandon them to their own devices. "Being left to fend for themselves may result in a negative response toward the host-country's culture, and/or contribute to a perceived violation of the psychological contract."²⁶ There are many things, therefore that business firms can do to help expatriates and their families through this cycle of adjustment as well as to enhance the performance of the expatriate manager on the job.

For the expatriate manager, certain *job factors* have been positively related to *work adjustment* in the foreign environment and successful performance on the job. For example, in the absence of adequate cross-cultural training, expatriate managers tend to exhibit managerial behaviors abroad similar to those used at home.²⁷ These behaviors, however, may be in contrast to the role communicated by the host environment; thus setting up a situation of potential *role conflict*. In cases where the international firm does not have an adequate understanding of the host environment, if, after training and further adaptation, the expatriate is perceived as identifying too closely with the concerns of the host subsidiary (*going native*) he or she may be recalled. An expatriate manager, on the other hand, who identifies exclusively with the parent company will not be successful in adjusting to and being accepted by personnel in the host subsidiary.²⁸ This points to a need for the international firm itself to have an adequate understanding of the host environment and to set up performance expectations for the expatriate manager that minimize role conflict. Research points out that international firms that reduce the amount of uncertainty with regard to expected behaviors in the work situation (*role clarity*) and also that allow managers more leeway in adapting the work role and setting to themselves (*role discretion*), rather than having to adapt themselves to the situation, are more likely to produce positive results. International firms should also communicate realistic levels of expected performance in early stages of the foreign assignment so that too much

is not expected of expatriate performance too soon.²⁹ As a contrast, the level of expected performance in many Japanese firms is much lower for expatriates during their first couple of years on the foreign assignment.

In addition to the previously mentioned use of compensations and benefits packages and logistical support, which aid primarily in the area of general adjustment, firms can provide further support in assisting the expatriate manager and his/her family members with *interactions and general adjustment*. This support can come in two forms: (1) Direct support via organization-sponsored programs and, (2) Indirect support in encouraging the expatriate manager but, more particularly the spouse, in the use of effective coping skills. To begin with, in-country support should reinforce predeparture skills and behaviors learned during the preparation stage. *Direct support* might come in many forms, such as: (1) continued language and culture training; (2) assistance from host-country staff in handling day-to-day living requirements such as grocery shopping, travel and schooling; (3) family mentoring programs, where host-country employees provide social support by volunteering to "adopt" a visiting family;³⁰ and (4) providing job search assistance and career counseling for the trailing spouse and other interactions to help him or her create a meaningful life abroad. Through *indirect support* family members can be encouraged to develop productive coping skills, such as: having family members try to understand themselves and what they expect to gain from the assignment; personal language study; getting involved in international clubs; developing hobbies; school and community involvement; and going to work in the local environment in areas such as teaching or starting a small business.

Inadequate Repatriation Policies

Repatriation or cross-cultural re-entry is the transition from the foreign country back into one's home country. Repatriates often experience problems similar to those encountered in initial cross-cultural entry. These involve re-adjusting to the home country work and nonwork environments as well as to interacting again with home country nationals.³¹ Until the 1980s, international firms had considered re-entry a relatively easy process and it is clear that very few firms had developed definitive *transition strategies*. But mounting empirical and

anecdotal evidence have demonstrated that re-entry is in fact a major problem, presenting the repatriate with new challenges, to the extent that it is now often referred to as *re-entry shock* or sometimes reverse culture shock³² "Re-entry is such a problem that it keeps many returning managers and their spouses from accepting a second overseas assignment."³³ In addition, studies indicate that 15 percent of returning expatriates leave their firms within a year of arriving home, while 40 percent leave within three years.³⁴ This amounts to a significant loss of investment funds and international expertise for these firms. Further, the way in which firms handle the repatriation issue will affect their ability to attract future expatriates.³⁵

Repatriation concerns are often divided into two categories: personal and professional. *Personal re-entry shock* involves individual re-adjustment to the previously familiar surroundings of the home country after living and working abroad for a period of time. A major reason that personal re-entry shock is such a problem is that it is so unexpected.³⁶ While both expatriates and their firms expect some adjustment problems when transferring abroad, few expect and are prepared for the adjustment problems that must take place upon return. For this reason some returnees are reluctant to even talk about these problems, feeling in fact that there is something fundamentally wrong with them.

The causes of these re-entry re-adjustment problems are to a certain extent inherent in the dynamics of having to adjust to living in the foreign culture for a period of time. In the often stressful process of adjusting to a foreign culture, expatriates tend to idealize their home country, remembering only the good aspects and forgetting the bad. When they return, however, they find things are not as rosy as they had remembered them to be and, in contrast, they even miss some aspects of the foreign environment. Many expatriates, in addition, are in high profile positions abroad and experience a status come down upon return. They also find the extensive social networks with fellow expatriates and foreign nationals they had relied upon abroad are not in existence in the home environment and reestablishing such networks at home may be quite difficult because similar mechanisms are not as common. Upon return, life at home may seem dull and unexciting and repatriates begin to glamorize instead their former life in the foreign location. Repatriates frequently also experience a sense of financial loss

because the extensive compensation and benefits packages they had become accustomed to are no longer available. In addition, repatriates are frequently out of touch with the changes in politics, fashion, sports, music and language which occurred while they were away. Changes in slang and music seem to be particularly problematic for teenage members of the family, though all children may have trouble re-entering school and gaining acceptance from peer groups. Finally, it seems many repatriates report that others show little interest in hearing about their expatriate experiences.³⁷ It is no wonder returnees often describe re-entry stages similar to those of culture shock experienced when they went abroad.³⁸ International firms can aid in personal re-entry adjustment by recognizing these problems and applying some of the same strategies used in initial adjustment to the foreign assignment.

For many expatriate managers themselves, *professional re-entry* has been more difficult than personal re-entry, especially for returnees to multidomestic companies in which the global experience is not considered critical to overall corporate success.³⁹ The growing yet still limited research on repatriation adjustment indicates a major reason for expatriates accepting the international assignment in the first place was the expectation that it would be of value in their career progression.⁴⁰ Many, however, return to discover that, at best, it has had a neutral effect. Often repatriates find their career has been in a holding pattern while others have been promoted ahead of them. Multidomestic firms in particular promote fewer than half of their returning expatriate managers.⁴¹ The repatriate, on the other hand, is likely to judge the re-entry position on the basis of whether or not that original expectation has been matched, especially when the international assignment has caused considerable family disruption.⁴²

One transition strategy that is increasingly used to deal with the problems of professional re-entry is the use of *repatriation agreements*, whereby firms give candidates preparing for international assignments written guarantees as to the length of the foreign assignment and that, upon return, a position that is mutually acceptable will be available. This kind of agreement seems currently to be more prevalent in European firms than in U.K. or U.S. firms. For example, a 1997 survey by the Conference Board of 152 HR expatriate managers found that while 74 percent of European firms survey provided such agreements,

only 50 percent of U.K. firms and 38 percent of U.S. firms surveyed did so.⁴³ Similarly the Tung-Arthur Andersen 1997 survey of 49 North American firms reports that the majority (almost 60 percent) did not guarantee a position at home upon successful completion of the international assignment.⁴⁴

In addition to the use of repatriation agreements, firms can ameliorate the problems of professional re-entry by: (1) maintaining professional contact with expatriate managers through occasional visits back to the home office; (2) by selecting a home office executive to be a sponsor or mentor who will represent the interests of the expatriate manager while away on assignment and assist him/her with the repatriation process; (3) establishing policies and procedures that assess and utilize skills gained during the foreign assignment; (4) establishing official repatriation programs which can help expatriates through counseling, relocation assistance, financial assistance, finding schooling for the children, stress management, training in workplace changes and helping repatriates and their families establish new networking opportunities and social contacts.⁴⁵

More and more, repatriation is seen as the final link in an integrated, circular process that connects initial effective recruiting, selection and cross-cultural training of expatriate managers (along with their families) with adequate in-country support, and finally, with successful reintegration into the back-home organization. In light of the sizeable investments international firms are required to make in their expatriate managers, the survival and ultimate success of such firms in an increasingly global marketplace requires that these firms understand and adequately address the various aspects of this integrated process; and that they focus on the long-term goals of knowledge creation and global leadership development.

Notes

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