

Coming home - understanding the corporate re-entry of international employees

by Betina Szkudlarek

The cross-border mobility of staff is an everyday reality readily taken for granted by internationally minded employers and employees. Cross-border resettlement in business, education, leisure and political spheres has increased over the last few decades as the fingers of international commerce have encircled the globe.



Expatriates and repatriates have been thoroughly researched over the years with corporate repatriates being the most heavily studied. In part this is because work-related difficulties are among the most often reported concerns among corporate

employees returning to their home country. Issues related to workplace readjustment, commitment, transfer of knowledge, productivity and post re-entry turnover rates have been widely discussed in the international management literature.

Typically, returning executives complain about a lack of suitable career prospects, insufficient challenges and responsibilities in the workplace, and a lack of understanding and appreciation by home-organisation colleagues of the knowledge and experience gained whilst abroad.

Individual career paths are often neglected within the strategic planning of international assignments, meaning that taking on such an assignment can be a risky move for the long-term career prospects of the repatriate. The importance of long-term planning for sojourning individuals has been well documented in the literature. However, these issues continue to be rarely addressed by home-organisations.

Another concern of returning employees is the discrepancy between repatriates and HR managers in defining a successful repatriation. While returning individuals focus on country culture readjustment, HR managers are primarily interested in work-related outcomes and expect the returning individuals 'to hit the ground running'.

In fact, research demonstrates that multinational corporations seem to largely neglect the issue of re-entry. Among researched organisations, as few as 4.3% of U.S. corporations gave employees notice of half a year or more of a return date. The majority of returning individuals received arbitrary ▶

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notice, indicating little preparation on the company's part for the repatriation of their employees.

Additionally, the home-organisations' work places are often considered a poor match for the newly acquired experiences, knowledge and skills of repatriates. Among the other issues reported as problematic by repatriates are the loss of autonomy, technical and managerial obsolescence, a reduced range of responsibilities and the loss of in-house networks.

Consequently, a number of considerations need be taken into account by managers seeking to develop successful strategic repatriation policies. The coherence between selection procedures, expatriate performance management and the repatriation system is crucial. A certain level of turnover upon repatriation is considered functional and should be included in the strategic planning of international assignments.

Knowledge management

The transfer of knowledge upon return is one of the most important strategic objectives related to successful repatriation management. Employees on international assignment gain not only substantial knowledge related to particular local management practices and local market conditions, but also develop a number of general

management skills and interpersonal relations competences.

Unfortunately, returning individuals frequently face resistance when attempting to transfer their valuable foreign knowledge to the home-organisation. A closed and reserved

the willingness of the employee to share information.

Proactive organisations could also undertake a number of actions supporting knowledge transfer. Research shows that both appropriate HR practices and self-adjustment

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attitude among home-country employees is found to hinder the transfer of knowledge from the host- to home-country organisation and negatively influence the re-adaptation of the returning individuals. In the literature this phenomenon has been labelled a xenophobic response.

Two strategies could be applied here. First, repatriates could mask the source of their knowledge and, in this way, prevent a prejudiced response. Second, the home-country managers should be offered assistance in recognising the benefits of the international experiences gained by their repatriated colleagues.

Moreover, for an effective transfer of knowledge to take place upon repatriation there must be a fit between the interests of the organisation and

efforts of returning individuals contribute to the in-company learning processes.

Repatriate dissatisfaction

The challenges of repatriation, along with dissatisfaction at the company's management of the re-entry process, often coincide with a lack of commitment to the home-organisation and can consequently lead to a higher presentation of turnover intentions among repatriates.

Despite a relatively small number of empirical studies on turnover rates, the few that have been published report unusually high levels of turnover among repatriated employees. The 2008 GMAC Global Relocation Trends Report states that, among 154 surveyed organisations, more than 50% of international assignees left

their companies within two years of returning. The most important factor predicting the commitment of individuals to their home-organisation is the demonstrable value placed on the international experiences of returning assignees. Moreover, scholars identify several other factors influencing commitment to a home-unit: tenure within the home-organisation, pre-departure training, role flexibility, clarity of job responsibilities, and adequate career development planning.

The majority of available research related to repatriate turnover inadequately focuses on individuals' inability to manage the re-entry process, and their more-or-less complete dependence on organisational arrangements and support practices.

Such a view is one-sided and does not account for the proactivity of returning individuals. Repatriates might voluntarily choose to change employers in the hope of a better match between their newly acquired skills, job ambitions and work responsibilities. Such protean careers lead repatriates to opt for boundary-less occupations, running independently of a particular organisational setting, rather than having a life-long commitment to one employer.

Spouse/partner re-entry

While many repatriation factors are

identical for both partners, research indicates several unique areas of spousal readjustment. Returning to the job-market seems to be one of the biggest challenges, yet very few employers offer job-finding support to returning spouses.

It is surprising that the number of companies offering such services are so low when taking into consideration that successful spousal repatriation is largely acknowledged as one of the key factors in the re-adaptation of returning expatriates, especially within the corporate context.

Research shows that the general readjustment patterns of partners tend to positively reinforce each other. This, in turn, has a direct influence on the readjustment of the returning employee and their performance in the workplace.

Post scriptum

Despite much research on expatriation, the theme of cross-cultural re-entry - its course, impact and features - still remains largely neglected and underestimated in the sojourner's transition trajectory. At the same time, available empirical investigations point to a number of substantial concerns, which affect the psychological well-being, social readjustment and cultural identity of returning individuals.

The significance of these concerns

strongly suggests that re-entry should become an issue of the highest priority to both sojourning individuals and those responsible for managing the re-entry transitions of international employees. ■

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