

Repatriating the Expat – A Missed Opportunity?

Repatriation: Creating or destroying knowledge in the organisation

Recognising the need to strengthen their competitive capabilities by building a mobile and interculturally literate workforce, an increasing number of organisations make use of pre-departure trainings to help expatriates adapt to foreign environments. But going away is not the whole story. Much overlooked is the fact that much of the value of the international assignment is either created or destroyed by the way in which returnees his or her repatriation.

Reverse Culture Shock

Why does the return process merit special attention? Is the expat not simply coming home to his or her familiar environment? These are typical questions asked both by expatriates preparing for their return, and those responsible for dealing with re-integration at the home organisation. There are several reasons why coming home is frequently a more disorienting and frustrating experience than the actual adaptation to living in a foreign environment: First of all, very few returnees are aware of the phenomenon „reverse culture shock“; they simply do not expect to experience difficulties. But when (and as) problems arise, many returnees begin to doubt themselves and the value of their international experience, rather than dealing with the process in a more positive way. Thus, reverse culture shock has been very aptly termed **the unexpected confrontation with the familiar** (M.Paige): Only upon re-entry do returnees realise to what extent they have grown and changed during their sojourn abroad. Abroad has become „home“, and many aspects of the culture of origin appear limiting or far

less attractive than before. At the same time, family, colleagues and friends exert pressure, expecting the returnees to fit in, to be just the same as prior to the sojourn. As a consequence, many returnees experience a deep sense of isolation and disorientation. An additional factor is that the original „home“ has changed during the time abroad, so that the returnee actually meets with much that is unfamiliar. On top of this, a host of practical aspects have to be dealt with. This includes career-issues (often a source of severe disappointment), housing, schooling for the children and making new social contacts.

Steps to Facilitate Re-Integration

Ideally, re-integration should be handled as an integral part of the whole expatriation process, including and on-going information flow between the expatriate and the home organisation during the sojourn, as well as honest **communication** about career prospects. It is vital that both career and family issues of the returnee be given attention. The returnee needs to be made aware of the challenges ahead, and to be encouraged to begin **planning** for the return (at least six months prior to departure). Those at home (both in the business and private environment) can do much to ease the process by providing **practical support** upon return, and by a willingness to **listen** to the returnee's perspective. It is essential that organisations make a clear commitment to providing their returnees with opportunities to share and **utilise** their **international experience** in their professional environment. A very useful element of a systematic re-integration approach are **re-entry training** for the returnee (and the family). This training is conducted several weeks after return and lasts one to two days. It helps the participant to get some closure on their experiences abroad, offers a framework on making sense of the current situation, eases the sense of isolation and signals the organisation's appreciation for the international experience.

Benefits of Re-Entry Programs for Business Organisations

The costs of expatriate assignments are high, and re-entry programs ensure that both the expatriate and the organisation get maximum benefit from the assignment. By establishing re-entry programs as part of the expatriation process, organisations make sure that they **retain mature, flexible, loyal and motivated employees**, who can also serve as role models to encourage international thinking and mobility within the organisation. In addition, the re-entry process represents a unique opportunity for **international knowledge-management** in the organisation. During debriefing meetings, during the re-entry training, by giving the returnee opportunities to share his experiences at home and in future international projects, the returnee's insights and experiences become part of an organisation's body of knowledge. Conversely, if the returnee does not feel heard or appreciated, the greatest part of his or her learning will be lost in silence and frustration. This decreases the value of the overall assignment significantly. Finally, re-entry training speeds up adaptation at home and expresses the organisation's recognition of the challenges faced by the returnee. This increases both the **productivity** and the **motivation** of the individuals concerned.

Upwards from 25% of American returnees leave their organisations within three years of return from an international assignment – typically to join a competitor who is more appreciative of international experience. Should business organisations really risk this?

If organisations want to strengthen their global outlook and want to communicate convincingly to their employees that intercultural experience is a high priority, and that such learning is valued by the organisation, it is important that they put greater emphasis on the structured management of re-entry processes. The pay-off is tangible: decreased staff fluctuation among returnees, increased motivation, better international knowledge management in the organisation, improved staff willingness to accept international assignments and increased overall flexibility of the organisation to adopt to new corporate environments. Can global players really do without these?

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(References and Further Reading: