

Issues of the Expatriates Re-Entering the Home Country

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Abstract

There have been considerable advances in our understanding and knowledge of the issues surrounding the management and support of expatriates in terms of recruitment and selection, pre-departure training and compensation. The expatriation process also includes repatriation: the activity of bringing the expatriates back to the home country. Preparation involves developing plans for future and gathering information about the new position. The firm may provide checklist of items to be considered before the return home or although preparation of employee and family for the transfer home. This paper deals with what could be called as the post-assignment stage. Re-entry, though, raises issues for both the expatriate and the multinational, some of which may be connected to events that occurred during the international assignment. We treat this stage as part of the international assignment.

Keywords: Re-entry; International assignments; Repatriation process; Expatriate

1. Introduction

It is evident that there have been considerable advances in our understanding and knowledge of the issues surrounding the management and support of expatriates in terms of recruitment and selection, pre-departure training and compensation (Global Relocation Services, 2002). Although it is now more widely recognized by managers and academics that repatriation needs careful managing, attention to this aspect of international assignments has been somewhat belated. Re-entry into the home country presents new challenges. The repatriate may be coping with what has been termed re-entry shock, or reverse culture shock. Whereas people frequently expect life in a new country to be different, they may be less prepared for homecoming to present problems of adjustment. As a consequence, it can be a traumatic experience for some, even more than what was encountered in the foreign location. From the multinational's perspective, repatriation is frequently considered as the final stage in the expatriation process, but the multinational's ability to attract future expatriates is affected by the manner in which it handles repatriation (Harris, et al 2004). Repatriation adjustment is often more difficult than the stage of cross-cultural transition; and a majority of repatriated employees are dissatisfied with the repatriation process. (Adler, 1981)

2. Objectives

1. To examine the process of re-entry or repatriation
2. To study the issues related to re-entry or repatriation
3. To study how an organisation can design an effective repatriation programme

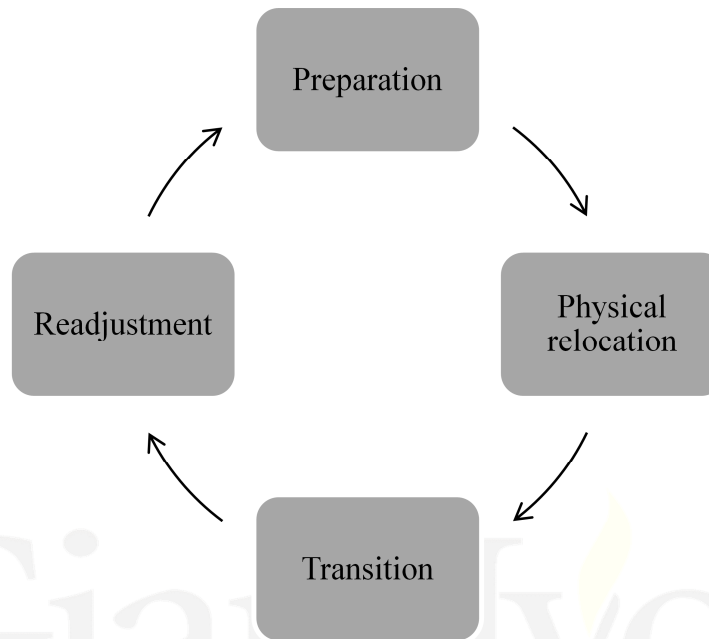
3. The repatriation programme

Typically, on completion of the international assignment, the multinational brings the expatriate back to the home country, although not all international assignments end with a transfer home. Some expatriates may agree to become part of the multi national's international team of and thus have consecutive overseas assignments. In the event that one

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of these consecutive assignments involves the expatriate returning to the home-country operations, it will be treated as 'just another posting' rather than re-entry or repatriation. At some point, members of the international team or 'cadre' will face repatriation although; as it often occurs at the retirement-from-work life stage, there will be different concerns that need to be addressed. It is possible to divide repatriation into four related phases as shown in the below diagram.



Preparation involves developing plans for the future and gathering information about the new position. The firm may provide a checklist of items to be considered before the return home such as closure of bank accounts and settling bills or a thorough preparation of employee and family for the transfer home. However, there is little evidence in the literature that preparation for repatriation is seen by the multinational to be as important as pre-departure training. At best, there may be some inclusion of repatriation issues in the pre-departure training provided to the expatriate. Physical relocation refers to removing personal effects, breaking ties with colleagues and friends and travelling to the next posting, usually the home country. Most multinationals use removal firms or relocation consultants to handle the physical relocation, for both the movement out and the return home of the employee and family, and this may be formalized in their HR policies. According to Forster, comprehensive and personalized relocation assistance reduces the amount of uncertainty, stress and disruption experienced by the repatriate and family. Transition means settling into temporary accommodation where necessary, making arrangements for housing and schooling and carrying out other administrative tasks like renewing driver's license, applying for medical insurance, opening bank account (Sand-Hart H 2010). Some companies hire relocation consultants to assist in this phase also. Readjustment involves coping with such aspects as company, changes, reverse culture shock and career demands. The readjustment phase is the one that seems to be the least understood and most poorly handled.

Repatriation programme as an ongoing process

Jassawalla, et al (2004) has developed a theoretical model of how an effective repatriation programme can look like. In this model the authors have divided the repatriation

process in three stages as shown in table below. This model identifies the key action steps taken prior to departure, during the assignment, and after the repatriates return that appear to determine the organizational and individual outcomes.

Prior to Departure	During their Stay	After they return	Outcomes
Task Clarity	Perception of support while on assignment	Quality of interaction with sponsors	For the firms : improved retention, return on investment in human capital
Career Counselling	Nature and frequency of communication	Perceptions of support upon return	For the employee: lower uncertainty and anxiety, greater satisfaction, greater feelings of belonging
Formal Policies for Repatriation			

*Source: Jassawalla et al, (2004)

4. Issues related to re-entry or repatriation

The Personal Challenge

There is a tendency for repatriates to expect several things:

1. Although people and places change, relationships that were once vital will continue to be so;
2. Family and friends will be as eager and excited to hear about their adventures as they are to speak about them;
3. Activities and/or job responsibilities that inspired them before they left will continue to do so;
4. They will feel relaxed, at ease, and "at home" because they are once again in a familiar cultural and physical environment; and
5. Their broader perspective on life, abilities to deal effectively with diversity, and their understanding of the global nature of the human condition will be acknowledged and valued.

The actual experience of return proves, however, that to varying degrees all of the above assumptions are false. In actuality, there are certain immediate "Re-entry Challenges" what Dr. Bruce La Brack, University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA, identifies:

- Boredom;
- A frustrating inability to explain experiences to those not having similar travel backgrounds;
- A kind of "reverse homesickness" for the people and places one has left behind;
- Being misunderstood when using behaviours, such as humour, that are now out-of-place;
- The "no one wants to hear" syndrome;
- Feelings of alienation that can arise in seeing faults in other's situations that were never noticed;
- A lack of opportunity to apply new knowledge or skills;
- Concern that the positive effects of the international experience will be lost.

Discovering that their expectations are unrealized can cause disappointment, anger, and perhaps depression. Surrounded once again by the familiar, repatriates realize that it is not just that others are not interested in their stories and new skills. Perhaps more important, they themselves have changed much more than they realized—once was interesting and engaging is no longer so.

The Re-entry 'Shock' or Reverse Culture Shock

Returnees often are surprised to experience a re-entry cycle similar in form, but often more intense, to the one they encountered during their experience abroad. The initial adjustment curve encompasses a "honeymoon" followed by phases of discomfort, tentative adaptation, extreme challenge, and integration over time. The re-entry process parallels this process. Its stages have been described as shock, a sense of homelessness and homesickness, then peace and acceptance. Re-entry can bring on the same fatigue, restlessness, and vague dissatisfaction with life. The re-entry curve having initial emotional highs lasts from only a few hours to a month. The emotionally lowest periods often are reported in the second and third month of return, stabilizing in a feeling of neither very high nor low, but rather "average" after about six months.

The Professional Challenges

Intercultural practitioners know that professional integration is key during repatriation. Issues of career development and job effectiveness have been in the limelight of re-entry training for more than 20 years. Certainly, laudable repatriation programmes exist. However, a 1996-97 study conducted by Berlitz International and HFS Mobility Services (representing more than 40 companies from 25 countries) indicates that although companies are meeting needs associated with the details of moving household goods and cost-of-living adjustments, they need to do more in helping employees and their families meet the "softer" needs arising from the stress of transition and its effect on social life, individual development, and career management.

According to the study, the consequences of not meeting the softer issues are clear: "Nearly 40 percent of respondents were not interested in taking another overseas assignment, and fewer than half felt that their firm understood the new skills they had acquired. It seems that the benefits did not appear to outweigh the personal and professional price the assignees felt they had paid the results of the project demonstrate that corporations risk forfeiting any long-term return on their globalization efforts if support for the international transferee's career path is perceived to be inadequate in the eyes of the international transferee."

Career Development and Job Satisfaction

Career advancement often is cited as a major reason for accepting an international assignment. It follows that expatriate returnees wish to be kept abreast of changes in the home office. They want to stay closely in communication with the major players while they are away, and they are concerned about the timing of and their job responsibilities on return. The repatriate often encounters changes in the formal and informal information channels in the home organization, particularly if there has been widespread restructuring and downsizing. Technological advances in the multinational may render the repatriate's functional skills and knowledge outdated. Usually, the international assignment is a form of promotion. (Welch, 2003, p. 149-169).

An all-too-common theme that repatriates seem to believe is "out of sight is out of mind." The lack of the expatriate's visibility at the home office contributes to his or her feeling that achievements and newly acquired skills are not recognized on return. Inadequate

communication about changes in domestic strategies and priorities compound the situation. Anxiety inevitably increases with questions about how the overseas assignment will fit into an overall career path, especially if the timing and nature of the domestic assignment is not addressed until just prior to return. The perception of having job responsibilities that are a "good fit" with capabilities developed overseas has an important influence on the employee. This may be rated as more important than a salary increase in contributing to repatriates' satisfaction with the new domestic assignment. Finding such a good fit is complicated by several factors, one of which is the expectation of colleagues who have not been abroad.

5. Strategies for Maximizing Returnee Potential

In general, there are many suggestions and strategies available today for companies wishing to develop repatriation practices that honour and use the important potential available in their returnees. For example, during an overseas assignment, decision-making responsibility often is quite autonomous. Relearning to work within the home-office procedures and environment can be restrictive. Providing a repatriate with a job that encourages a wide latitude in decision making about what to do, whom to involve, and when to act can mitigate the sense that domestic responsibilities are less challenging and fulfilling. At the same time, the returnees' ability to function autonomously provides a direct benefit to companies that use self-managing teams. No matter the purpose of the assignment, the majority of returnees and their families usually are eager to assist in the preparation of colleagues who are about to be sent abroad.

Additional strategies include developing written policies that clearly address the company position in all aspects of an upcoming international assignment. Although such policies can be changed over time, they go a long way toward assuring expatriates that the company is aware of the issues to be faced. The positive effects are maximized when such policies are coupled with a mentor programme. Here, a highly placed executive from the home office takes responsibility to maintain an expatriate's visibility until his or her return by ensuring continuous information flow and a sense of connection. Such a mentor can offer guidance in finding a "best fit" for the repatriate in new domestic responsibilities and in maintaining morale in difficult times. The mentor also can ensure that the returnee is formally "welcomed home," acknowledged for the challenges of the experience, and given opportunities to debrief and evaluate his or her personal and professional experiences. Certainly, career counselling before, during, and after assignment is critical.

Meeting Family Needs

The employee, repatriating spouses and children also experience both personal and professional/scholastic challenges. The expat kids are concerned with fitting in with their new peers; adult expats have their own social obstacles to overcome throughout the repatriation process. In the first few weeks, friends, and relatives at home will mostly be supportive and solicitous, but this may change. Unless they have been expats themselves, they will neither know nor understand what it means to be an "invisible immigrant" and how to best support former expats in their coming home from an international assignment. They need basic information about the process of re-entry, too. In addition, they need help in psychologically adjusting as they discover that the once-familiar is now less-known and that, perhaps most of all, they have changed how they view the world and themselves within it.

The quality of adolescent repatriation is particularly important. This is the time when children are exploring consciously their personal and group identities. If not forewarned and prepared, the shock of re-entering the country they were raised to consider their own but in

which they now feel culturally foreign can be devastating, and the disorienting effects can be long lasting.

Parents, human resource managers, relocation professionals, and international educators share the responsibility of educating children about re-entry. Even two years abroad can be life-changing in ways that become clear only on repatriation. An increasing array of resources exists for adolescents, many of them easily accessible on the internet. Indeed, the Internet provides opportunities for repatriated adolescents to talk with peers about their experiences. They can discover that they are not "terminally unique" but part of a large community of globally experienced individuals.

Just as home-office colleagues may look askance at repatriating employees who bring new approaches to the workplace, so, too, may students and teachers at the neighbourhood school view repatriating children. Just as it is important to educate the first about the repatriate's potential contribution to the corporation, so, too, is it important to educate teachers and administrators. Although technically "back home," repatriated students may experience significant cultural shock and homesickness, and may demonstrate perspectives and behaviours unfamiliar to their peers. It is also the case that such students can potentially enrich the school and classroom, especially if the diversity they offer is acknowledged and appreciated.

Designing a repatriation programme

Although there is no simple, quick solution, preparing the repatriate and family for re-entry appears to have some value. The potential for mismatch of expectations regarding the future may be addressed as part of pre-re-entry training before the return, and discussed during re-entry counselling sessions, sometimes referred to as debriefing, between the receiving organization in the home county and the repatriate (Ripmeester, 2005). In today's parlance, such sessions would enable both parties to 'take a reality check'. Some companies assign the expatriate a mentor also referred to as a company contact, sponsor or 'godfather'. The mentor is usually in a more senior position than the expatriate, from the sending work unit, and knows the expatriate personally. The rationale behind the use of a mentor is to alleviate the 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind' feeling discussed earlier through the provision of information such as workplace changes on a regular basis, so that the expatriate is more prepared for conditions faced upon re-entry. A mentor should also ensure that the expatriate is not forgotten when important decisions are made regarding positions and promotions. It is reasonable to suggest that the practice of mentoring, to be effective, has to be managed. It may be that having a mentor assists the expatriate to adjust during the foreign assignment but, by itself, does not necessarily help re-entry. An effective mentor is likely to alert the firm of the imminent return of the repatriate and thus affect the re-entry position, or the practice is part of a managed repatriation programme. Although recognition of the importance of repatriation programmes is increasing, and companies are experimenting with other measures such as mentors, other-avenues could be explored, such as using repatriates as an important information source- inviting repatriates to assist in developing repatriation programmes may contribute to relevant and effective policies (Brynen, et al 2007). It may also have desirable side-effect upon readjustment, simply by giving participating repatriates a sense that they are not an underutilized resource, and that the firm recognizes they can make a valuable contribution to the expatriation process. It is, naturally, important that wherever possible the multinational ensures equity of treatment expatriates.

6. Conclusion

Repatriation is a profound cross- cultural transition that affects people across their life roles. Repatriation policies are essential to assure the adjustment and retention of expatriate employees. Organizations that operate in the international market cannot shy away from adopting repatriation policies and practices to assure that they retain their most important asset – their cadre of global managers. Returning expatriates are likely to leave their organization when they perceive that it fails to develop mechanisms and practices to reward, utilize and circulate their newly acquired knowledge and skills. Structures and processes need to be in place in order to allow the repatriate’s knowledge and expertise to be shared with other and become embedded in the organization. It is the knowledge possessed by these key individuals that is the main asset for corporations to compete in the global market.

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