



Expatriate Support Programmes:

Small investments with large effects. However, still many incongruent expectations

Throughout the world organisations send employees on foreign assignments. These expatriate assignments involve high costs and failures are not uncommon i.e. one out of four assignments fail. For many companies a reason to try defining the perfect expatriate profile for their organisation and subsequently invest heavily in selecting and training this 'Mr or Mrs Right'. But what ensures success? Which Expatriate Support Programmes (ESPs) provide true added value? When is the investment justified? Expertise in Labour Mobility (ELM) decided to conduct a survey and test a hypothesis: Investing differently in expatriates - not simply more budget - delivers better results for all parties involved.

Expatriate Support Programmes (ESPs) are designed to assist expatriates in adapting and adjusting to the host country to minimise the 'culture shock' and ensure the immediate productivity of the expatriate. According to Cees de Soet, International Expatriate Manager of Heineken it is obvious. "If no support programmes are received the expatriate does not understand the essentials and cannot communicate according to his/her responsibilities". But the Expertise in Labour Mobility (ELM) survey revealed that there is some considerable room for improvement in ESPs. Some striking observations were made regarding the difference between what expatriates have experienced as useful and what the companies believe is useful.

What did expatriates and their spouses say:

1. The expatriates rank language training and cross-cultural training for their children as most important factor to make the assignment abroad succeed.

2. The individuals expressed a clear need for more focussed and more practical information on the local situation and local culture. Respondents greatly value the ability to speak the local language and understand the local cultural habits, regardless of how different the culture is from their own culture.
3. Dual career support and mentor programmes are trailing the list.

What did the companies say:

1. Mentor programmes are important.
2. Dual career support is essential to make the assignment succeed.
3. Language training and cross-cultural training for the children is something very few organisations provide.

The above findings support ELM's hypothesis that investing more specifically in the needs of the individual expatriate (and his/her family) could improve outcome. Knowledge of the language and the culture of the host country are considered important abilities. The need for practical culture training, even for inter-regional transfers where assignees move within fairly similar cultural environments, is evident. This significance of speaking the local language and having knowledge of the local culture is supported by other studies. The finding that expatriates rank both language training and cross-cultural training for their children as most important support programmes is a novel and valuable insight.

During an international assignment interpersonal skills are very important, however, there is a popular belief that technical skills serve as the main success factor to assignments abroad. This proved to be a misleading assumption as the main

reasons for failure of expatriate assignments are the inability of the expatriate and/or the inability of the expatriate's partner to adapt to a different physical or cultural environment. Moreover, both expatriates and organisations alike, often underestimate repatriation. Readjusting to one's native culture can sometimes prove to be even more difficult than adjusting to a foreign culture. "Repatriation is even more important, than the expatriate programme itself. We want the expatriate to remain with the company, after the assignment has ended", states Caroline Heesbeen, Group HR director for MSI Cellular Investments.

The present ELM survey indicated clearly that the benefits of investing in expatriate support programmes outweigh the costs of these programmes. "If an expatriate does not feel at home, the investment can turn out to be very costly, both for the individual and the company", says Marijke Have, Manager Compensation and Benefits for Randstad Holding in this respect. Organisations using expatriates should examine carefully the cost of appropriate preparation against the total cost of the assignment. Especially the cost associated with an unduly long 'running-in' period at the beginning of the posting or the cost of failure.

The main aim of this pilot study was to find common themes that would enhance our ability to quantify the effects of support programmes. Further research is foreseen for the benefit of organisations committed to the success of international assignments. Contact ELM for more details: n.ripmeester@labourmobility.com

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