
Preparing Managers for Foreign Assignments

A good expatriate training program doesn't stop when the plane takes off.

**By Edward Dunbar
and Allan Katcher**

It is 10:20 a.m. and John is sitting at his desk, rereading the job description of district sales manager in Caracas—his new position. It's a promotion for John, but he's nervous about such a big move. He's never been to South America and isn't sure what to expect. When John mentioned his concern to his boss, she just clapped him on the back, said, "Forget it; you'll be terrific!" and changed the subject.

Two floors away, Susan, the director of international personnel, is reviewing the file of a manager returning from four years in Hong Kong. He has been solely responsible for the company's southeast Asian operations, and Susan is at a loss as to where to place him back in the States. No comparable position exists; even a promotion would involve less responsibility.

With the international scope of

most large organizations today and the continuing move to offshore manufacturing in the third world, scenarios such as those are not unusual. Firms frequently feel compelled to expatriate staff, but most companies do not have a clearly defined human resources programs to support international managers.

In a recent study conducted at Columbia University with *Fortune* 500 international personnel managers, 70 percent of the respondents reported that expatriates were sent abroad when local candidates were not available. In a third of the cases, high-potential domestic employees were the preferred candidates to relocate abroad. But only 30 to 45 percent of the multinational corporations in the study provided some form of cross-cultural orientation to expatriates.

The four myths of international management

In our work with international personnel managers, we've identified four general beliefs as to how the international manager adjusts to conditions abroad.

Our person in Havana describes the well-connected company employee abroad, who experiences little

difficulty in adjusting or performing in a foreign country. Companies that view the foreign assignment this way do relatively little for their staff. Personnel managers who rely too much upon this myth will think of life in a large city such as Los Angeles as the same as that in Jakarta, emphasizing the similarities to the exclusion of the differences.

The lost employee myth holds that the person who is out of sight is out of mind. Such employees are isolated from the domestic realities of the firm and are uncertain as to when or if they are to repatriate—or if there will be a position for them on their return.

For such employees, expatriation is bad in terms of organizational politics. In an organization that views expatriation this way, repatriated managers usually have limited input to the home office regarding policy or business strategy abroad. One U.S. personnel manager said he never wanted to see his expatriate managers return for home leave during their assignments, and that he did not want to repatriate them within the company after their return.

The ugly American myth describes the expatriate who is unfamiliar with the cultural realities of the host country. "Ugly Americans" are not just unhappy living abroad; they are a liability to their firms. (Although, in some cases, the truly culture-blind international employee may actually

Dunbar is a partner of Pacific Psychological Associates and a research psychologist at UCLA's National Research Center of Asian American Mental Health, Department of Psychology, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1563.

Katcher is president of Allan Katcher International, 7251-A Balboa Boulevard, Van Nuys, CA 91406.

experience less stress than one who is actively engaged with the host culture.) The less people are aware of their own cultural biases, the less competent they will be in work relationships with foreign nationals.

The cultural relativist finds relocation challenging both personally and professionally. These people are good at working with others and enjoy it, so the company assumes they will adapt easily. As with the our-person-in-Havana myth, companies that believe their employees are cultural relativists are likely to ignore adjustment problems and missed business opportunities.

The reality of the expatriate's situation, of course, lies somewhere between the stereotypes. Some managers will succeed under any circumstances, others would clearly benefit from a comprehensive human resources program, and others—even those who have been solid performers

We have seen foreign clients abort promising business opportunities when cultural differences with American management led to animosity and mistrust. In one case, a Japanese firm canceled several contracts after two years of working with the project manager of an aerospace company, feeling that the manager's lack of cooperation was putting the program seriously behind schedule.

In the process of conducting cross-cultural training for corporate staff members, we have seen that even experienced managers do not naturally think of cultural differences as offering an opportunity to improve communication or employee motivation. Many Americans still have difficulty viewing their own behavior as a potential liability when living or working abroad. It may be that cultural empathy cannot be taught, but international managers can learn how to adapt to cultural differences.

cesses of the corporate suite.

Corporate-level human resources personnel often have little involvement with international staff, remaining sadly ignorant of repatriates' expertise and business knowledge. As a returning employee stated, ". . . very few comprehend what I've done and experienced. . . and what I've experienced isn't of any importance to anyone but me." Reviewing and documenting the experience and performance of international employees abroad would be a first step toward increasing HRD staff involvement with expatriate personnel.

Another major cause of dissatisfaction among returning employees is the financial challenge of adjusting to life in the U.S. In our work with repatriated staff, we've found the shock of facing financial realities to be greater than that of making cultural readjustment.

A frequent issue of concern is that many individuals do not have hard-and-fast return dates. All too often employees begin to consider the career implications of their overseas experience only upon their return. As one repatriated person reported, "There was no definition to my job. The international division of the company promised certain things upon my return to the U.S., but the domestic division did not know about them or honor them."

To address those issues, training and development must extend beyond orientation to on-site involvement and repatriation support. The primary goal, however, should always be to guarantee the readiness of the man or woman abroad to contend with host country competitors and other foreign nationals.

Components of international training and development

From our research and experience, it is clear that content and sequencing are critical to the success of international human resources programs. Five components are essential in creating competency in members of the overseas staff:

- language training
- cultural and business orientation
- family consultation
- mentoring on site (by another seasoned expatriate or an appropriate host-country colleague)

The shock of facing financial realities is greater than that of making cultural readjustment

in the U.S.—will be liabilities abroad, even under the best of circumstances. Subscribing to any of the myths prevents a company from truly preparing its international managers for success.

The problems

An international assignment can present various problems. These include diminished performance, customer dissatisfaction, small candidate pools from which to select, and early return rates of staff (which in some industries remain amazingly high). In some exceptional cases, major substance-abuse and psychological problems can severely undermine the performance of individuals with previously consistent career histories and successful social lives.

In our experience, the true cost of ill-suited or unprepared international staff is the missed business opportunities in developing markets abroad.

Cultural sensitivity is still an important aspect of expatriate competence.

The overseas assignment can also serve to make or break a talented manager or executive. International assignments frequently provide more autonomy and a broader scope of responsibilities than do corporate positions. Often, work is accomplished by fewer people, requiring that they be responsible for a full range of business functions.

The heavier load can cause problems for expatriates while they're abroad, but it can be equally devastating once they're back in the U.S. The general manager of a *Fortune* 500 firm's Venezuelan subsidiary, for example, returned home to a corporate staff position and found himself rubber-stamping new business proposals. A vice-president of a Hong Kong division was assigned to the same position in her home office. Suddenly, she was no longer involved in strategic planning but limited to tactical issues, and she realized she loathed the long and bureaucratic decision making pro-

■ a career management approach to expatriation.

Not only *what* but *when* needs to be a concern in training international staff. An effective program addresses human resources before, during, and after the foreign posting. The accompanying box underscores the implications of program phase and content for international human resources.

Investing in overseas success

The success of any international business undertaking requires the coordination of domestic and foreign human resources staff to ensure that the parent company is being adequately represented abroad. U.S. firms need to view expatriation as a strategic move—the exportation of the best person prepared to do the most difficult job.

It is only by investing resources in international employees—before, during, and after their assignments—that companies will realize a true competitive advantage worldwide. ■

Program Phases for Expatriate Training and Development

Pre-departure


Language briefing: introduction and overview.
National or regional orientation: business issues.
Personal and family orientation: customs and roles.
Career management: succession planning.

On-site

Language training.
Local mentoring: customs and roles.
Stress and adjustment training.
Career assessment (during home leave).
National or regional orientation: business issues

Repatriation orientation

Life after the perks: financial management.
Re-entry shock: customs and roles.
Career management: options and plans.



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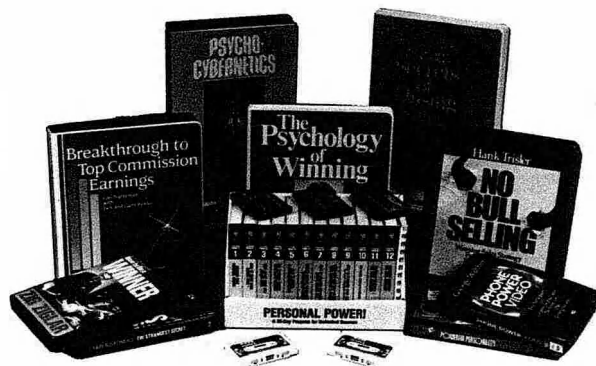
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