

Extension Material 6.1

Management of overseas assignments

The following summary is based on Andy Molinsky and Melissa Hahn, '5 tips for managing successful overseas assignments', Harvard Business School, 16 March 2016.

Overseas assignments are not suitable for all managers and professional knowledge workers, and care needs to be shown in the selection of those that are considered suitable. According to Molinsky and Hahn, sending talented employees to work overseas is a way of leveraging the benefits of the global economy. But they argue that this can be expensive, up to three times the cost of an annual salary. Consider for a moment the kind of costs that an organization would experience in sending staff overseas on secondments or fixed-term contracts.

Whether the money spent becomes an investment, with calculable returns, or a cost and an expensive mistake depends very much on whether the secondment is considered successful by the company. The authors argue that many lack the know-how for optimizing the potential benefits, leaving them disappointed with the results:

The unfortunate reality is that even companies providing well-crafted relocation packages (including the all-important cultural training) may not have the talent management mechanisms in place to truly leverage the valuable skills expatriate employees gain during their assignments.

Based on conversations with executives and consultants with considerable experience of managing the expatriates and seeking insights into what is needed to maximize the value of these important assignments, the authors identified five key factors linked to successful experiences for the organization and the expatriate worker:

- 1. Have a compelling purpose—and the right person.** This involves three things:
 - Choosing a person who is open-minded and committed enough to adapt to the local culture—someone who is not only technically competent but self-reliant and adaptive.
 - Thinking about the specific skills that this person will develop as a result of the assignment—opportunities to learn 'to do the job' will be limited, so it is important to ensure that the required capabilities and competences are already in place.
 - Identifying how these new skills will ultimately benefit the organization—linking these capabilities and competences to financial, developmental, and reputational returns.
- 2. Assign top-notch home and host sponsors.** This means ensuring the worker remains in frequent contact with the home organization as well as appointing contacts/mentors at the home base and destination whose role it is to support the worker and provide important points of contact, particularly in the early phases, to iron out personal and professional issues that might arise. The authors claim that the most successful sponsors are typically people who have been abroad themselves and are empathetic and understanding about the experience—not only with regard to what an assignment entails and what can be gained but also with how challenging it can be to go overseas and return.
- 3. Stay in frequent contact throughout the assignment.** This is about communications, which need to be frequent and open throughout the assignment. And it is communication that is only initiated by the expatriate worker but also the role of the home-based mentor in influencing and learning from what is happening overseas. Without this kind of communication, the organization is unlikely to learn much of value that can be used in future overseas assignments. The authors argue that this communication should follow a highly structured process with regular and agreed calls and emails but also be flexible enough to accommodate unforeseen developments.
- 4. Make a plan for reintegration.** The authors point out that reintegration should start well before the assignment formally ends and involve facilitating the return home and back into the organization. Questions of promotion, development, and reward may need to be considered and the person's career path trajectory. Reintegration is also about managing expectations of both parties. They claim that while the timeline may vary, it is critical to build in a structured transition process with a mixture of check-ins and downtime, so that readjusting is seamless.
- 5. Develop ways to share knowledge from the assignee's experience.** The authors emphasize the importance of accessing and retaining the knowledge acquired by the expatriate worker during the period abroad. This can be done in different ways such as:
 - Getting the assignees to blog about their experiences—both during and after the assignment. These posts can be shared via internal social media and commented on by others in the company.

- Others make use of metadata on employee profiles to highlight the skills acquired during the assignment. This not only enhances returning expats' credibility but enables anyone else in the organization to find them when searching for their specific expertise.
- Companies can also host special sessions or brown-bag lunches on managing global work and intercultural communication, including returning expats alongside outside guest speakers and panel discussions.

The authors conclude by saying that however it's done, the key is to find ways for people to share what they've experienced and learned, so they can process the experience, reinforce the importance of these global assignments within the organization, and, most importantly, transfer the valuable knowledge they've acquired back into the company.