



ENSURING THE SUCCESS OF INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS:

Expatriate and Family Preparation

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Executive Action Summary

"What's necessary now is to make expatriate assignments work."

Managing costs, mitigating risk, maximizing opportunities...

Today, as never before, smaller domestic organizations are taking their companies global. The first wave of globalization was driven by multi-nationals needing to control costs by making products offshore. Now, and into the foreseeable future, it's about establishing an avid global market for products and fielding an expatriate workforce that can successfully accomplish this task.

The challenge in expanding globally is making sure that our expatriates -- often joined by their families -- are prepared for the business, social and day-to-day challenges of living and working in a different country and culture.

Expatriate failure rates among U.S. companies remain high. Poorly trained assignees and families continue to find the offshore experience more difficult than expected, and those unable to adjust to work and life in foreign settings generally perform poorly.

Successful assignments hinge on comprehensive training that includes much more than cross-cultural exposure, and success rates increase greatly when this training includes the spouse or significant other. Conducting a pre-assignment assessment helps to prevent assignment failure by identifying and ameliorating problems before they occur.

Assignment mentoring helps to lesson culture shock and facilitates a smooth transition to the host country. On-going professional support helps to keep things positive and productive, and repatriation coaching makes the transition home easier for assignees and the organization, and also improves retention. Language training and assuring the availability of counseling assistance if/when necessary is an essential component of this proactive approach.

Sending assignees to strategic global locations is a high-risk, high-reward proposition. When successful, assignments can expand an organization's global footprint, increase international business, effectively transfer knowledge to local operations, and enhance an organization's prestige. Failed assignments, though, exact huge costs -- from the expense of sending and supporting an assignee (and family) offshore, to paying for poor performance during an assignment, and lost business opportunities.

This paper demonstrates how an integrated, well-designed global support and readiness program, covering all phases of the expatriate "journey" from pre-departure to repatriation, provides an extended warranty, mitigates risk, improves global presence, and enables organizations to realize their international business objectives.



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This paper, the second of our publications on international assignments, focuses on the need for organizations to understand the importance of providing every assignee, spouse, or partner with comprehensive pre-assignment preparation services. You will discover that pre-assignment preparation is an important phase, and one that involves giving employees and families a good understanding of the process they'll soon begin. This is more than cross-cultural training, as it includes the assessment of those selected regarding their current status, expectations, and any/all special needs.

We view the assignment process as having a number of individual steps, or phases. It begins with candidate selection, and moves on to early awareness, readiness, and preparation (the topic of this paper). Next comes specialized in-country support, and finally, repatriation preparation, helping the employee and family in returning home. These are the steps of successful international assignment management, but as you'll discover, the time and energy put into these steps varies greatly from company to company. So, too, does international assignment success.

What has guided our thinking in writing these papers is a systemic business, management, and personnel approach focusing on these processes, and, our understanding of the importance of strategic talent development and management. Our goal in writing this paper is to help organizations understand the literature and findings on this topic, and to use this information to implement recommended programming to make international assignments successful for companies and for expatriates and their families.

Let's begin with a business case. Management at company ABC, by Board directive, decided that it is in the best LONG-TERM interest of the organization to establish an international presence. Like many organizations, they've decided that they'll initially send business travelers and a small group of expatriates to explore and assess business possibilities at several world locations. They also want this initial group of "key" managers to be closely involved in continuing business planning. After a business location is selected, their plan is to send additional expats on two- to three-year assignments to locate and train local host nationals who will then run the operation locally. This, they believe, will enable them to establish a strong presence and a local market for their products.

From a strategic stand point, the company will need employees who can achieve these goals. To succeed, the organization must select suitable expatriates; negotiate salaries and benefits; properly manage the legal and financial requirements for placing workers in other countries; carefully plan the duration, terms and goals for each assignee; prepare assignees (and families, if applicable) for relocation and manage each assignment closely; and, when it's time to return home, coordinate repatriations.

A major, yet often overlooked step in this process is to adequately assess assignees and families during the preparation phase. This enables us to discover and address any special needs prior to departure, and greatly increases the likelihood of assignment success. Families are often unaware of the difficulty they will face when trying to address any special needs or concerns while living abroad.



These are only a few of the many issues that, when left unaddressed, adversely impact foreign assignments. From multiple studies we know that the majority of international assignment failures are the result of such family-related concerns.¹

Some organizations use external consultants to complete the task of assessment. They feel that this strongly reinforces the confidentiality of the interview process, and allows the employee and spouse (or partner) to feel comfortable in discussing issues that are "private." In addition to professional assessment skills, we've found that it's important for those providing this service to be world travelers themselves; it's even better if they have experience working with families. We've seen a qualitative difference in the use of such consultants because expatriates view them as "mentors," not just as interviewers.

It is very important for any organization implementing an expatriate workforce to make absolutely certain that everyone — expatriates; families; and company officials — clearly understands assignment goals and individual responsibilities. When this requirement is overlooked, problems are inevitable.

Expatriates and families must be properly assessed, sufficiently prepared, and thoroughly trained for their assignments. Preparation and training should include a thorough discussion of, and an introduction to the host country culture; the focus should be on helping them to understand the importance of cultural sensitivity. Research tells us that this focus increases assignment success. Moreover, when so prepared, employees will more strongly support their organization and its efforts offshore.²

While return on investment (ROI) is important, it's equally important to view expatriate assignments in the context of long-term goals and how the overarching program will enable the organization to be optimally positioned in the global market. When successful, an expatriate assignment is a talent development and management process that helps organizations to build a competent international business team. Yet, many continue to struggle with this important area of business.

So what's the problem?

As late as 2004, few organizations spent enough time to adequately prepare assignees for international relocation, and spousal/family preparation needs were most frequently overlooked. Why was this so? Because most organizations were trying to keep costs down, and because the literature on expatriation focused on "academic" rather than "business" findings. But the literature as related to expatriates assignees was clear, and had revealed for more than two decades that international assignments present extreme challenges for expatriates and their families. It also revealed that family health plays a significant role with regard to assignment success or failure.³ Failures, when they occurred, remained undisclosed within most organizations.

Then, in 2005 an important GMAC study confirmed what some had been sensing all along: the importance of family health and adaptation were paramount with respect to the success or failure of an assignment.⁴

1. Aswathappa, K. and Dash, S. (2008). International Human Resource Management: Text and Cases. Tata McGraw-Hill, New Delhi, Chapter 6: Staffing of International Business, p. 148.

2. Chew, J. (2004). Managing MNC Expatriates through Crises: A Challenge for International Human Resource Management, Research and Practice in Human Resource Management. 12 (2), 1 - 30.

3. Yochanan, A. and Shortland, S. (2008). *Women and International Assignments: Taking Stock - A 25 Year Review*, Human Resource Management, Summer, Vol. 47, No. 2, Pp. 199-216.

4. GMAC Relocation and the National Foreign Trade Council (NFTC). (2005). The 11th Annual Global Relocation Trends Survey. Available on the web.



SOURCE: GMAC SURVEY (2005):

- ▶ Ten percent of all assignments were uncompleted because expats returned home early;
- ▶ Of the assignments that failed (or were compromised), two-thirds of the respondents indicated "family adaptation problems" as the main reason with "the spouse's career" given as the second most prevalent concern;
- ▶ Many expatriates reported that they felt out of place and dissatisfied both during and after an assignment, which caused at least one in four to search for new employment;
- ▶ While organizations reported an attrition rate of approximately 10 percent among their general populations, 21 percent of expatriates left their company in the midst of an assignment; another 23 percent left within a year of returning home. (As reported in a press release after the 2005 study.)

Shortly before, a Cendant study had reached similar conclusions:⁵

From the Cendant Study

Family adjustment was reported by expatriates as being the most significant challenge they faced during an assignment, and they said that they would have benefitted from more preparation, training, and guidance. Consequently, this area was reported "as an area of important need," by Cendant.

A significant number of expatriates also disclosed that "they had operated at significantly reduced levels of efficiency and/or effectiveness offshore, because of the increased stress family concerns had caused them. Among this group, many often needed to cut hours from their work to attend to pressing family matters either in-country or back home."

In the process of developing the International Assignment Profile (IAP) researchers interviewed the managers of expatriates and discovered that many of these managers felt their direct reports operated at lower levels of efficiency during the early phase of their assignments (the first 4 to 6 months), either leaving some of their work undone or requiring assistance by co-workers or the boss. This "spread of effect" phenomena further illustrates the importance of preparation and support. When an assignment is compromised, not only is the expat employee's work diminished, but those around him/her must pick up the slack, stress, and extra work.

Getting the most from your expatriate workforce is important to business success and profitability; a successful expat team can help to establish competitive advantage. But expatriate assignments don't come cheaply: It's estimated that they cost from two to three times that of similar positions back home. According to the Harvard Business Review (1999), an expatriate assignment is probably the single largest expenditure most companies will make on any one individual other than the CEO.

Using typical, but conservative published cost figures from Price Waterhouse and failure rates (due to preventable issues) established by GMAC, Cendant, and more recently, by Right Management, Ernst & Young, Deloitte, and IAP, losses shape up as follows:⁶

Total Costs of 100 family assignments (24-30 months)	\$103,200,000
Failure rate from all causes	6%
Percent of failure due to FAMILY ADJUSTMENT ISSUES	67%
Costs of failures due to family adjustment	\$4,148,640
Costs of impaired (but not failed) assignments	\$2,064,000
Total lost costs due to family adjustment issues	\$6,212,640

5. Cendant Mobility and the Atkinson Graduate School of Management. (2004). Emerging Trends in Global Mobility: The Assignee Perspective. Available on the web.

6. If your cost figures appear somewhat different, or your estimates of failures and compromises are also different, we have a spreadsheet available in which you can enter these figures as variables, allowing the testing of various cost scenarios and outcomes.



Again, using a conservative 6 percent failure rate (all causes), the loss estimate for 100 expatriates exceeds \$6 million. This figure does not include any "hidden" losses, such as morale issues, lost business opportunities, or behavior that may have lessened the organization's position/status in the community, or worse, compromised its position with the host country.

For families, the cost is just as great, perhaps even greater. The stress they experience when relocated to another country is severe. It's important to know and plan for this. Families can and do break up under such stress. And while some of the 40 percent of those leaving their organizations either during or shortly after an assignment ends, do so for reasons of opportunity, many leave because they've lost faith in their organizations. We've found that successful organizations responsibly prepare their employees and families for the expatriate experience.

But, that was then, this is now...

Awareness of these issues and their causes should lead most professionals to correct them. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Recent reports [from Ernst & Young and Right Management] reveal the contrary. In fact, in a recently released Right Management study, expatriate failure rates are now even higher than reported in previous years.⁷

As late as 2013, the Right Management study revealed that only 58 percent of all international assignments were viewed as successful by more than 200 CEOs and senior Human Resources managers questioned.⁸ And, according to SHRM (2013), despite its importance to assignment success, almost one in four U.S. companies

did nothing to prepare their expatriate workforce either prior to departure or during an assignment.⁹ This same report states that American organizations are more likely than those from other countries to provide little or no training for expatriates. Thus, it is no surprise that U.S. organizations continue to have the highest expatriate failure rates worldwide.

What's the Solution?

From the literature, we learn that European and Asian multinational companies report much higher success rates for their expatriates than do American companies.¹⁰ And, while more than 70 percent of U.S. expatriates have reported that they received little or no training and preparation for an assignment, failure to adequately prepare assignees is rare in Europe and Asia.¹¹

What can U.S. companies do? There is really no alternative. To meet business objectives and to remain competitive, those involved in selecting and preparing expatriates must fully understand, accept, and implement these findings.

The Four Essential Characteristics of a Successful Solution

1. Confidentiality is the "key" to information gathering...

The solution begins, once a candidate is selected, with an open and confidential assessment interview.

Why is the assurance of confidentiality so important to the success of the assessment process? Because some of the topics discussed are "personal" in nature, and

7. Right Management, the Manpower Group. (2013). Many Manager Found to Fail in Overseas Assignments. Available at: <http://www.right.com/wps/wcm/connect/right-us-en/home/thoughtwire/categories/media-center/Many+Managers+Found+to+Fail+in+Overseas+Assignments>
8. Right Management, the Manpower Group. (2013). Survey on Global Leadership Trends. Available at: <http://www.right.com/wps/wcm/connect/right-us-en/home/thoughtwire/categories/media-center/Many+Managers+Found+to+Fail+in+Overseas+Assignments>
9. Mauer, R. (2013). Survey: Companies fail to train managers for overseas assignments. SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management). Available at: <http://www.shrm.org/hrdisciplines/global/articles/pages/fail-train-managers-overseas-assignments.aspx>
10. Harris, M.M. (2008). Handbook In Research on International Human Resource Management. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates/Taylor & Francis Group. NY, NY. p. 189.
11. Ibid, pl 189.



no one, least of all expatriate candidates, will share important details about their personal and family lives if they believe their disclosure could become part of a company record. The support staff professional lets them know that their discussion will be held in confidence, and that the organization will not know, and does not need to know what's been shared.

After a candidate is selected, organizations can use either their (internal) EAP or an external counseling resource to assess employees and families prior to relocation. Some may also choose to use an instrument like the IAP to assure the congruence of their assessments and to help their EAP or contract professionals to learn as much as possible during what is usually a time-limited period (two to four hours). There are many individual characteristics (personality and behavioral factors) that positively or negatively impact assignments.

Knowledge of these factors is most important, and using objective assessment criteria increases the likelihood of ever uncovering relevant information. The discovery of individual and/or any special medical or personal needs very much falls into this category as well.

The fact is, few expatriate candidates will share important details about their personal lives (and concerns) if they believe such disclosure could end up in a company record. And frankly, management does not need, nor are they entitled to such information.



2. The pre-departure interview should be "required"...

There is no correlation between the success an employee had on one international assignment to any new assignment. In short, no two countries or world locations are exactly the same. There may be similarities, but in general, each has its own history, culture, business culture, expectations, and challenges. The differences between a well-known, comfortable and desirable assignment in Paris, and a much less desirable assignment in Ulan Bator, Mongolia, are immense. Individual and family situations are always changing as well, making a new assessment valuable.

Therefore, we recommend that organizations implementing this type of pre-assignment process make participation mandatory. This makes good business sense because employees, families, and the organization are all at risk here. As stated above, it even makes sense to require those who have successfully completed prior assignments to participate.

Offering a preparation/support service as an option is not a good decision because it's often those most in need who choose to "opt out." Mandatory participation eliminates this potential shortcoming. But we strongly believe that for employees and families to be comfortable in using this service, it's best positioned as a positive effort, devoid of any stigma, and viewed as a non-clinical mentoring service.

3. This process is best when it's efficient...

Pre-assignment preparation is a busy time, not just for the employee and family, but also for Human Resources (both at home and in the host country), as well as for legal, finance, and for the relocation contractor. There are a great many things for everyone to do, and schedules are often hectic. This is when tools and technology can help, and there is a highly effective tool for those providing the pre-departure



interview/ assessment – the IAP, or International Assignment Profile.

An experienced, well-trained counselor requires up to four hours to interview an employee and family (or partner), and to prepare a workable plan of action. Determining any special needs, such as those required by children, exploring the relationship(s), discussing any possible issues back home, exploring (any) career concerns expressed by the employee, spouse, or partner, and other personal concerns or issues along with medical needs are just some of the areas the interviewer must cover. Then another one-to-two hours are spent in consultation and planning. Many destinations also require several in-depth discussions, and the interviewer will often provide reading materials (even books) to help out.

We've discovered that the IAP is an effective tool that helps interviewers not only to increase the amount of information they gather, but also to reduce the time needed to both gather and analyze data. This enables the interviewer and family to spend more time attending to the important issues.

International Assignment Profiles developed the first such tool, the IAP, to address exactly these issues. The instrument provides an "online" artificial intelligence-guided expert interview. The questions are what would be asked by a professional counselor, but because the IAP is administered "online," the employee and spouse/partner can complete the questionnaire on their own, at their convenience. Research in this area reveals that online questionnaires are answered more truthfully, as compared to face-to-face interviews.

The IAP analyzes the data collected, compares the family (employee/spouse, or partner) to a large sampling of respondents, and prioritizes concerns. This information is then analyzed by matching assignees to specific destinations, with the key concerns (those that could negatively impact an assignment) placed atop a working list. This saves the interviewer time and enables the professional to focus on the most important areas/concerns during the follow up process. In addition, the IAP explores general psychological traits, helping the interviewer to put family needs into perspective, and enabling the development of a "tailored" action plan to address any concerns or vulnerabilities discussed.

Using this technology to gather and analyze data generally results in an accurate picture of the employee and family, enables the interviewer to implement appropriate services to address any vulnerabilities, and takes far less time than direct questioning. In short, with the IAP, the professional interviewer/counselor spends his or her valuable time working with and for the family, not in trying to discover/uncover problem areas.



4. To work, the services provided must be effective...

International business involves risk as well as opportunity. Today's organizations appear to understand and carefully manage the financial areas of global business, and expats themselves regularly state that any/all financial concerns were well taken care of. However, companies do appear to be far less knowledgeable of (or concerned about) the personnel areas. In studies where expatriates are asked questions about personnel issues/concerns, they often say that support in this area is very much "lacking." Despite the fact that the most frequent reason for assignment failure is the inability of the spouse and/or family to adapt to the host-country's culture, few expats believe their organizations are doing much in this area of personnel support. Expatriate assignments are fraught with unforeseen challenges and obstacles; moving a manager and family from Los Angeles to Houston may be stressful, but it simply does not compare in magnitude to moving the same family offshore.

The foregoing document closely adheres to the literature regarding international assignments and the need to adequately prepare the assignee and family before they embark on their journey. The business goal today is to send expatriates to explore and seize business opportunities at locations around the world. Expatriate assignments are expensive and failures are costly, but organizations can vastly improve their success rates by making certain that family needs/concerns are addressed, and that their employees and families have been well prepared for the challenges – and opportunities – that lie ahead.

Expatriate candidate success depends not only on individual skills and personality traits, but also on the depth and quality of the preparation they (and their families) receive prior to departure. In this context, we recommend that the family be viewed as an integral component in pre-departure preparation and training, and the spouse or partner must participate in many of the discussions and programs related to

preparation and acculturation. We find that ineffective and inadequate training and orientation results in many expatriates viewing their foreign assignment as an "assignment in ambiguity." Poorly prepared families find themselves struggling with an ill-defined assignment, an uncertain future, low morale, and increased stress.

The Steps of a Proactive Family Support Service Include:

A Program Orientation

The orientation is best provided by an HR professional from the company, and includes: a brief discussion of the support service; the purpose and reasoning behind its implementation; the mandatory nature of the service; how it works, the "call" schedule, including the mandatory initial interview; and the various program offerings. This information is important in promoting acceptance and use of the support service, and is best provided during the pre-departure orientation/training period. We recommend that a program brochure be included with other orientation/training materials.

The Pre-Departure Interview — First Contact

This is a pre-departure interview call/or meeting with the employee and spouse/partner, scheduled by a professional from the Expatriate Support Program. For those organizations using an instrument like the IAP, this is the follow-up call that happens soon after the employee and spouse or partner complete the online IAP questionnaire. Its purpose is to introduce the support service, discuss the assignment and the location, and to find/discuss (any/all) personal or family needs that may have surfaced during the completion of the IAP.

For those not using such an instrument, this call focuses on questions that will help reveal issues that could negatively impact an assignment. Its purpose is also to prepare the family for any adjustments they'll



likely need to understand and make. During this call, it's important for the staff representative to build a trusting relationship with the family so that they are more likely to reach out for assistance, should that be necessary.

The Follow Up In-Country Call

This call, made after the employee and family (when applicable) have been in-country for 30 days, is a follow-up to the pre-departure calls, and is made as a "check-up" to make sure that things are going well. It is also important that the support staff professional determine whether or not any additional help may be needed. We recommend to always use the same representative who worked with the family pre-departure for follow ups calls.



Continuing Follow-Up/Outreach

Within 90-days of the initial in-country contact, the professional staff representative calls the employee (spouse/partner, if applicable) to refresh the relationship and to make certain that things are proceeding smoothly. At this point, most expatriates are beginning to move through various stages of cultural adaptation and it's important for them to

discuss and understand this. After the follow-up "outreach" call, even though things appear to be going well, staff representatives re-contact their assignees at least twice annually (more frequently, if necessary) until repatriation or reassignment.

Problems can and do arise for some, and it's important that professional counseling services be made available for employees and family members should assistance be necessary. When it's effective, the support program staff are viewed as "mentors," not counselors, and because of this relationship, they can successfully direct assignees to professional services when necessary. It remains difficult, though, for expatriates to find acceptable psychologists or counselors on their own at many world locations. As such, we recommended that every effort be made to have professionals available locally, in-country. This can be accomplished by Human Resources or Medical, but more easily, by contracting with an international mental health service provider in the United States or elsewhere. It's important to know, that at locations where no suitable provider is available, telephonic or secure electronic counseling can serve as a viable alternative.

Repatriation Preparation

The assigned support staff representative contacts the employee and family three months (90-days) prior to repatriation. This call is made to discuss the process of repatriation and to help them to understand the often unexpected difficulties and challenges of returning home. This call often includes sending them articles to read and discuss, and in some cases, repatriation preparation involves multiple calls.

In Conclusion

The literature strongly supports our experience that successful international business is the result of a well planned, well understood, and well supported assignee preparation effort. This includes the orientation, preparation and support of not just employees, but also spouses/partners, and families.



Dispatching employees to strategic off-shore locations is a high-risk, high-reward proposition. Successful overseas assignments can expand an organization's global footprint, increase its profitability, effectively transfer knowledge to local operations, build global management talent, and enhance organizational prestige throughout the world. A failed assignment, though, exacts huge costs – from the initial cost of sending and supporting assignees (and families) on an unsuccessful stint, to lost opportunities, and much more. Dissatisfaction on the part of the assignee or family leads a high percentage of your key personnel to leave their jobs soon after returning stateside.

Living and working in an unfamiliar environment and safely and successfully navigating an unfamiliar culture, is complex, tricky, and emotionally taxing, particularly when one is far removed from familiar resources or remedies. Overseas assignments are fraught with unforeseen challenges and obstacles, often compounded when families are involved. As we trust our paper convincingly conveys, an integrated, well-designed global support and readiness program – covering all phases of the expatriate "journey," from pre-departure to the return home – is an extended warranty on your expatriate workforce, mitigating risk, improving your global presence, and enabling you to realize your international business objectives.



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Neill Carson holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, was a postdoctoral fellow at Yale University, and received his MBA from the University of Houston. Dr. Carson has extensive experience in organizational and behavioral science applications in business, as well as computer and artificial intelligence technologies. He is president of International Assignment Profile Systems, Inc. (www.iapsystems.com), a firm specializing in using technology to match and assist in the preparation of families for international assignments. He is also a senior faculty and organizational consultant with the Levinson Institute, and a faculty member for the Harvard Medical School series on leadership and organizational design. Articles featuring his work have appeared in major business publications as well as professional journals, technology magazines and NPR (National Public Radio). His feature articles on expatriates, relocation, and talent management have been published by the Society of Petroleum Engineers, Talent and Technology, and Mobility (online and print editions).

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ABOUT LEIDOS

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