

How Can Expatriates Stay Current On Assignment? 'SoMe' Solutions For Business

Expatriates know all too well the value of Social Media, increasingly known as 'SoMe', for keeping in touch with loved ones back home. Skype, Facebook, YouTube are all invaluable in sharing the highs and lows of relatives' lives 1000s of miles away. We like to stay connected, we like to stay current, we like to learn. It comforts us to know what our loved ones are up to, to celebrate even minor successes, or to share a laugh about a trending amusing cat video. It is usual for all of us to use Social Media in our private lives for everything from sharing photos, to finding new recipes, to learning how to change a light bulb. Almost everything is available to learn via Google. Where businesses are failing their employees, especially global employees, is in translating the use of such social learning into a business environment. Wake up Business! Be aware that if you are not providing social learning tools, your employees are finding them anyway. YouTube, LinkedIn, SlideShare and more are used daily for sales teams to find new selling techniques, for customer services to find better ways to serve your customers, and for Expatriates to navigate their way around their host locations.

Expatriates in a host location are often out of sight and out of mind from the home business. Whilst they are busy gaining all manner of life experiences on assignment, a formal learning programme as part of performance management can fall through the cracks of home and host. For localised contracts, there is the advantage of being part of a local performance management programme, however, that programme is unlikely to harness the wealth of learning freely available on the internet, and indeed is likely only include local language face to face training workshops, such is the state of business learning today. In my opinion, workshops fail Expatriates

on two levels; firstly, the language barrier and secondly, the 'Injection Education' nature of the beast; if Bob Smith has mastered enough Chinese to understand the workshop trainer, what does Bob do 3, 6, or 9 months later when the trainer isn't there for him? Learning at the point of need is what is driving Expatriates and their colleagues to turn to social learning via the internet.

Social learning is a modern way of offering employees the ability to more easily and informally learn from each other. For hundreds of years we have learnt this way; from a farmer teaching the farmhand, to the master and apprentice. It is only in more recent decades that we have put qualifications and 'formal' learning ahead of this more traditional value system of young learning from old, or peer learning from peer. It is ironic in many ways that as we see some breakdown of community in the western world, we see the rise of communities of practise springing up in the virtual world. Expatriates turn to Twitter or LinkedIn to build strong and reliable networks across geographies. Internet forums allow connection to others, and these can be especially helpful to spouses looking to build a network without belonging to a host location company. Some forums, such as InterNations.org, also engage in regular meet ups, which add additional value to the local information, jobs for spouses, housing and marketplace it offers online. Twitter too can result in a Tweet Up, taking the virtual into reality.

One element we have yet to address is the important question of why should an Expat care to stay current? Surely immersion in the locality is the point of an assignment? Without doubt this has worth, however, an Expat knows the bubble they live in will eventually pop, as they are localised, or repatriated. They need to be prepared. Most businesses fail to adequately prepare for an Expat's repatriation, with high attrition rates the result. Sadly, this

statistic hasn't changed since I started in the relocation industry years ago. Failure to prepare is failure to succeed; an Expat returning home has challenges of reverse culture shock, has to fit back in, yet has emotionally and mentally moved on, and has to find their place where they have had no visibility. All of this can be eased if social learning tools are adopted across a business. Platforms such as Salesforce Chatter, Yammer, or Fuse give all staff, no matter their location, the ability to share best practise, to belong, to get their name internally known, and to therefore ease the transition back home, or to a new host location. The cultural as well as learning value of such tools cannot be underestimated. Staying connected whilst on assignment allows an Expat to stay current in a once familiar world. They do so in their private lives. Catch up Business, before you blow millions on yet another Assignee's failed Homecoming. Meanwhile your Expat is using their LinkedIn profile and 'SoMe' presence to plan their next move.



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