

Repatriation - Are You Playing For Keeps?

Repatriation issues have been on the agenda for global mobility professionals for decades, but how to successfully repatriate assignees still remains an elusive holy grail for many multinational organisations. In many ways, repatriation still remains the 'forgotten' phase of the expatriation cycle as the emphasis for expatriate support is generally limited to immediately prior to and during the international assignment experience. Companies often state that the intended value of international assignments primarily is global leadership development and global knowledge transfer. Following this line of reasoning, then any international assignment where the returning assignee does not continue his/her career path within the organisation as intended should in fact be labelled unsuccessful.

One explanatory factor to repatriation being so tricky to handle for global mobility professionals lies in the traditionally transactional and administrative role that corporate global mobility functions have played within organisations. Strategic implications of poor re-integration of a returning expatriate has historically been overlooked, as most corporate mobility functions are not involved in the decision making process regarding next career move for assignees. The disconnect between corporate global mobility functions and existing talent management and deployment strategies in many organisations thus makes repatriation one of the hardest phases of the expatriation life cycle to manage successfully.

While highly skilled and globally minded employees today are in even greater demand, it is all too common that high potential employees sent on international assignments choose to seek other employment relatively soon after they've returned from their assignment. Findings from Ernst & Young's 2013 Global Mobility Effectiveness Survey found that 16% of employees bolted within the first two years after a global assignment ended, up from 11% in 2012. That organisations are not able to retain these talented expatriates upon return is indeed wasteful of money, time and human capital.

Any organisation with an overall talent strategy characterised by a strong internal

"Build" focus will inevitably feel a loss if too many of their high potential employees makes the choice to leave shortly after completion of a strategic international assignment. However, a growing number of employers show interest in handling repatriation in a more professional and strategic manner. In Brookfield's 2013 trend study, 24% of the employers surveyed said they have linked a formal repatriation strategy to career management and retention, up from 16% in 2012.

Academic research regarding repatriate retention has had predominately two perspectives: a traditional one, which suggests that the main determinant of repatriate retention is the availability of repatriation support programmes; and an emerging one, which focuses on individual career activism in a changing employment context. Personally, I believe that repatriate retention is not about one or the other. Repatriate retention will only result from repatriation support programmes and career management activities (at both the organisational and individual level) that are aligned with the strategic talent management strategies of the organisation.

The global mobility landscape has changed over the last few years and the number of direct international hires, local plus assignments and various types of project based assignments the world over is steadily increasing. Some of these new types of international assignments are typically tied to a "Buy" Talent Strategy, and the focus might simply be to fill empty positions with qualified workers for a set time period. For many of these assignees the main focus is therefore generally not what happens after the assignment, but rather whether or not the assignment as such, is attractive. Maybe organisations are right in stating that repatriation support does not have to be in focus for these types of international assignments. But on the other hand, if repatriation support is not offered and repatriation difficulties in the future continue to be experienced by even larger number of returning expatriates, will that not negatively impact the productivity levels of these individuals? If they spend time both while on assignment worrying about what will come next for them and their

accompanying dependents, surely their effectiveness on assignment will suffer.

Mobility programmes of the future need to be closely linked to overall talent management processes. When international assignments were better tied to overall strategic talent management practices, early discussions regarding next career moves will be more natural and will not be done last minute with the repatriated employee more or less standing in the doorway. It is good business for any organisation to gather data and metrics regarding their global talent pool. But collected data also needs to be analysed and acted upon if it is to add any real value. Companies that know what their talent pools looks like, why talents leave the organisation, know what gaps might exist, as well as which types of strategic talent that need to be found either internally or externally in both short and long-term, will have a competitive advantage.

Regardless of international assignment type, your repatriation activities will require proper attention and resources, but the approach towards repatriation support might differ depending on whether your organisation has chosen a Buy or a Build Talent Strategy. However, ensuring that all repatriating assignees are able to apply the knowledge and experiences gained while on their international assignments upon return to new corporate roles, is key to both getting the most out of the investment made, and reducing repatriate turnover through keeping these global talents motivated and engaged.



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