

Five tips for international assignee adjustment

International assignments are unquestionably one of the quickest routes to building a global talent pool within any organization. Strategically, they are also an excellent way to spread functional skills around the world, deploying high performing employees at a moment's notice.

Whether your focus is on long-term assignments, or more project-based, rotational or short-term assignments, they are costly. Early return, compromised performance and post-repatriation attrition are all signs that your company's Return on Investment (ROI) was not met.

There is a lot of research out there that indicates the inability to adjust to the host location (by the employee or the accompanying family members) is responsible for assignment challenges or failures. At Crown World Mobility, we've pulled together some of our favorite tips on how to support assignment adaptation.

1. Selection:

Make sure you have the right person going to the right place at the right time

Do you have an assignee preparedness or assessment process in place?

For too many companies the only criteria for sending an employee on an international assignment are technical skills and willingness to go. With so little attention to whether this is a "best fit," the risk of the assignee and/or their family experiencing difficulties is high and assignment failure is a possibility.

Adding this step to your pre-departure process does not require a big budget. Consider implementing one or more of these into your process:

- **Self-assessment questionnaire:** Give your employees a pre-assignment questionnaire that directs a conversation between them and their family about their lifestyle at home, and what needs to be recreated or maintained in the host country (for example, financial responsibilities, elderly or sick relatives and their children's needs). The impact on the partner's career is increasingly becoming a consideration for any family. Addressing any potential "surprises" prior to the move is always much easier

- **Timing:** Where possible, increase the decision-to-departure timeline, particularly for developmental assignments and dual-career families. Making sure that your top talent can access an international opportunity at a time when they can perform at their best will open up the flow of talent – particularly for female high potentials and current leadership
- **Candidate assessments:** Introduce a candidate assessment program that uses competence-based inventories that are debriefed by a neutral coach. This type of risk assessment does not always have to be a “go/no-go” decision, but can be a way of identifying possible areas of strengths and challenges in the potential host location. Skill building starts with self-awareness!

Characteristics of successful assignees

- Motivated
- Timing is right for the family
- Open to new experiences
- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Flexible
- Sense of humor
- Cultural self-awareness
- Knowledge of the host location (culture, values, history, politics, economy, language, etc.)
- Able to build relationships and rapport
- Love of learning (opposite of know-it-all)

2. Roles and responsibilities: The success of the assignment is a shared responsibility

Many of us remember expat packages of the past, bursting with benefits and incentives to entice the employee to go overseas. Today, with the economic pressures and the perception that the world has shrunk, for many companies, international assignment packages have shrunk, too. But that’s not entirely a bad thing.

First, not all assignments are alike, and as a result, policies and support need to reflect these differences. But also, it’s important that the employee and family feel engaged in the preparation process and are committed to the success of the assignment.

Sharing the responsibility between your organization and the employee can be as simple as agreeing on assignment objectives up front, to the employee accepting some financial contribution or lifestyle adjustment in return for the adventure.

Clarifying HR and the assignee’s role in post-assignment career planning is essential to assignment ROI. Ultimately, many employees today are looking for an international career path, an adventure for themselves or their family, or simply being a part of a global team. Companies are changing their philosophies around how and why they send people on assignments, too. It is certainly worth addressing at the outset of your discussions.

3. Preparing assignees for culture shock: It is inevitable – and real!

Your employees and their families are going to experience at least one bout of culture shock early in their assignment. Culture shock is another term for stress and it can occur as a result of any significant change.

At a minimum, it will be triggered mostly by a loss of familiarity. Maybe they will get lost on their way to work, won’t be able to get the utilities turned on in their new home or struggle with the new cuisine. Later, they may experience a period of shock that is driven by an inability to fit in or missing their community back home; something that challenges their values and their concept of their own identity.

Why does this matter to the organization? Well, the symptoms can be physical or emotional. Loss of sense of humor, sleeplessness and a short temper are just a few signs of culture shock. Whether the employee is going through it or their family, it will impact the employee’s productivity. If you can’t prevent it, then you can at least prepare for it.

There is plenty of information online but a better solution is for the family to attend intercultural training. Most experienced assignee families will tell you that taking time at the start of a new assignment to consider the new culture and lifestyle, your past experiences and current motivation for this move, will help you settle into the assignment better. It helps to identify culture shock and plan strategies for managing it.



4. Family adjustment: Don't forget the family

It's easy to forget that for the employee, an assignment is about career opportunity and an international adventure. It may sound strange, but typically, the employee has it easiest on arrival, as they immediately start a new job and are heading to the office each morning. They have people to interact with, ask questions and they are focused on work.

For the family, however, the arrival is about leaving things behind and taking the initiative to start anew. Providing support services to help partners and children create their own lives, independent of each other, will be critical to easing adjustment.

Cultural training is the most obvious solution but language training, school search, look-see trips and partner support programs are great ideas, too. We recommend paying particular attention to the partner support programs. In this age of dual-career and dual-income families, finding a way for the partner to identify fulfilling ways to develop new skills, even if they cannot take paid employment, will make positive in-roads into a successful stay in the new location.

5. Repatriation: Plan for a successful return ... before they leave home

It may seem like putting the cart before the horse, but it's important to have a repatriation plan before you send someone on assignment. In most cases, these are your high performers or your future leaders, and it's important that both a professional and personal plan are in place.

The most common issue we hear about is high attrition rates in returning assignees – often as high as three times the company average. The employee comes back and is either shoe-horned into a role that happened to be open or returns to the same role they were in before their assignment. This often leads to demotivation and a feeling that all of their new global skills are being wasted – which they are.

Capitalizing on your investment means retaining a productive employee for the duration of the assignment and well beyond. Otherwise you become the global training ground for your competitors. It's not just the employee, though. It's important for everyone to think about coming home by:

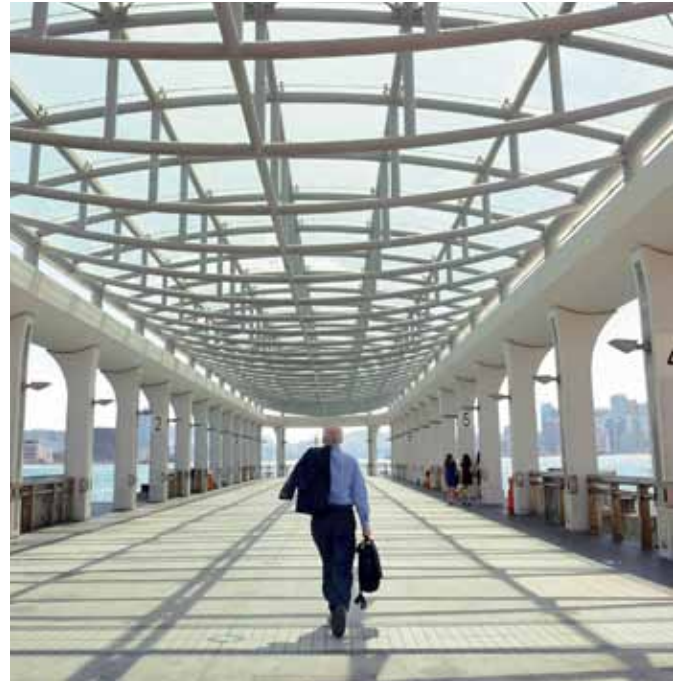
- Keeping in touch with colleagues, friends and family back home
- Providing a home and host country professional mentor for the employee to help them identify possible roles in the host country facility
- Providing repatriation training for the family before they leave the host country
- Providing assignment-related Return on Investment education for your HR and management teams who are leading repatriating employees on how to utilize the new skill set they bring to the role
- Creating a corporate imperative for global competencies

Conclusion

The employee and their family's inability to adjust is consistently rated by companies as one of the top challenges for international assignments.

Companies invest two to eight times the employee's annual salary in an international assignment. Return on Investment is increasingly important to organizations and employees alike. Dual-careers, aging parents and family stability are often complexities that employees face when deciding to accept an international assignment.

For all of these reasons, a focus on assignee adjustment and establishing support for employees and their families along the way makes a lot of sense. Crown World Mobility hopes that these five tips generate creative thinking and reflection around your company's mobility program strategy.



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