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Expat Networking: Helping You Improve the Success of Expat Assignments

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In an era of increased global mobility, many professionals are searching for ways to boost both the success rate of their companies' expat assignments and the retention rate of those same repatriating employees. Martins and Lengré suggest expat networking as a solution.

By Andrea Martins and Jill Lengré

With 69 percent of the 180 companies surveyed by GMAC Global Relocation Services, Warren, NJ, in its recently-released 2006 "Global Relocation Trends Survey" saying that expatriate numbers are on the increase, the issues of assignment success and retention are perhaps now more important than ever. Even more so with the survey's finding that China, India, and Russia were the primary emerging destinations for expats; yet those same three locations were described by the survey respondents as the most challenging expat destinations.

Most professionals seem to focus their companies' expat-support efforts, understandably, on key areas such as: salary; residency and immigration issues; the relocation process itself (which may or may not include an orientation at the new location and/or accommodation assistance); language training; cross-cultural training; and, perhaps, a few extra benefits for the spouse or family.

However, is this traditional focus enough? The 2006 survey shows that 34 percent of expats fail to complete an assignment (10 percent returning early and 24 percent leaving the company during the assignment). This statistic begs the question, "What else can companies do to improve the success of expat assignments?"

The answer is that there are endless possibilities as to how companies can better assist expats on assignment. In reality, budget constraints and internal priorities typically determine what can and cannot be done. If you cannot lobby to increase your expat-support budget (first option), we believe that even within budget constraints you still can make a difference if you can help your expats to network.

What Is Expat Networking, and Why Is it Important?

According to Dictionary.com, networking refers to "a supportive system of sharing information and services among individuals and groups having a common interest." Expat networking thus refers to the creation and use of this type of support mechanism as an expatriate. Helping expats and their families to network could be the differentiator between a failed (and costly) expat assignment and a successful one.

When expats embark on what may be viewed as "exciting" and "privileged" assignments abroad, it sometimes is forgotten that they typically are sacrificing all of their support systems at home—such as extended family, friends, babysitters, medical specialists, counselors, business contacts, sports teams, and hobby clubs—literally everyone who they normally would turn to in any aspect of their lives.

Singapore-based Yvonne McNulty, a PhD candidate in the department of management at Monash University, Australia—acclaimed for her in-depth, four-year



study of accompanying spouses on international assignments, "The Trailing Spouse Survey," published in 2005—said, "Support networks for expats are very important and help families adjust both practically and emotionally. Support networks replace family networks when you move. They provide you with information that is practical, which the company or service provider often can't do, such as where to buy the best birthday cake for your two-year-old's birthday party, or where to find the best doctor, best dentist, boot maker, and the like."

While some of these examples might sound trivial to some, in reality, they represent just a few of the day-to-day issues (heaped on top of other stresses, such as learning a new language, coping with long hours at the new office, adjusting kids to a new school, and queuing for hours at unfamiliar government offices to meet local requirements such as procuring a driver's license, and so on) that cause an expat and/or their family concern. They also are the same issues that usually can be solved by in-country support networks before they gain momentum as issues causing feelings of assignment isolation and unhappiness.

Dr. Marc I. Ehrlich of Trabajo en Equipo is an American clinical psychologist and organizational counselor with many years of experience assisting expats in Mexico City, Mexico. Dr. Ehrlich stresses the importance of expat networks.

"Support networks dilute the loneliness that so often debilitates the individual's willingness to learn and grow within the host country," he said. "Knowing that there are others out there who truly care for our well-being, extends our sense of safety, security, and protection far beyond the walls of our home. Support networks provide us with an emotional foundation, which not only eases the pain of culture shock, but allows us to develop new friendships that could very well last into the future."

Experience abroad has shown us first-hand the difference between expats who have and have not developed supportive networks. The former group typically adjust well to their new experience, learning as they go and keeping a positive outlook on their circumstances and their ability to overcome obstacles. The latter group—those who do not develop supportive expat networks and have no one to call at 3 a.m. if they need assistance—tend to dwell on the negatives and make life more difficult for themselves, their family, and their partner's employer. Often they turn to medication and/or leave early from an assignment with or without their family members. Needless to say, this family separation scenario is not healthy for any family and is not a positive contributor to an expat's effectiveness in the office.

How Can You Help?

We agree with well-known author and self-proclaimed "expat expert," Robin Pascoe, who said, "the best support networks are the ones that are 'homegrown' by expats themselves because they are in the best position to understand the overseas experience and its challenges."

However, prior to departure, most outbound employees are too busy closing down their life in one place to clearly think about what is ahead for them in their new location. Then, when they arrive, most expats and their families quickly are overwhelmed and quite often in culture shock, so the establishment of new support networks can be quite a daunting task even for the most proactive of the pack.

If you want to reduce the number of failed expat assignments in your company, you can help by providing your outbound employees—particularly the first-timers who might be caught up in the whole giddiness of moving—with an understanding of the critical nature of networking; the skills to get out there and network; resource ideas; contacts in their new location; and a safety net to try to catch those who start to fall.

Five Strategies to Help Expats Network

1. Teach the value of networking. Teach your outbound employees just how critical it is to set up a support network overseas. It is important for them to know that networking is not just the fun, social, fuzzy stuff—it is the stuff that can make or break a posting—particularly for the non-working partner who arrives without the built-in support network that a working expat inherits just by having an office to go to.

Also remember to explain to your outbound employees that they will need various types of support networks and that they would be wise to proactively establish emotional support networks (friends, helpers, doctors, psychologists, and the like); social support networks (for activities—both for the adults and for the children); and professional networks (such as peer groups, industry groups, student groups, and the like), to name but a few.

2. Build networking skills. Jeffrey Gitomer, in his best-selling “Little Black Book of Connections,” writes, “Networking is not an optional before or after business hours activity. Networking is a vital and integral part of your success.”

Do not be fooled into thinking that none of your expats need help in this area. At-home job competence does not necessarily correlate to networking competence—especially abroad in a new cultural environment. In reality, some of your employees may not even know how to network very well at home, let alone overseas where it becomes a more important self-survival skill.

Some ideas to help your outbound employees and their families include:

- provide networking books and resources;
- draw on the knowledge of the experienced to provide training and/or mentoring;
- send the whole family on a pre-assignment preparation course with other outbound employees—either internal or external to your organization (so they can start to network and develop allies themselves);
- bring in consultants who are networking-specific who can build the networking confidence and self-esteem of your outbound employees; and
- consider referring and/or paying for the services of (expat) life coaches abroad, who not only can help an expat to avoid that sense of abandonment in the new location, but also provide some invaluable one-on-one assistance to help overcome ongoing obstacles in his or her new life abroad.

3. Locate resources. Depending on the location(s) that you are sending your employees(s), a huge network already may exist—you just need to find it, tap into it, and introduce it to your outbound employees. However, if this is the first time that your employees are going to that location, then any time that you could spend doing some preliminary research about that location and/or existing networks in that location would be time well spent, particularly if there is a chance that you may use your research results again as you send other employees to this location in the future.

Pascoe, who travels the world extensively talking to expat communities, said, “In the old days, those networks would primarily have been ‘bricks and mortar,’ that is, physical location of clubs offering gyms or social events. But now, the Internet has made possible virtual support networks that are invaluable not only post-arrival, but pre-departure, as well.”

So, start online. There are some fabulous location-specific sites, as well as some general expat sites, all of which are valuable resources to refer to your outbound employees. Ideally, it would be great to create a handbook with the resource/network information you have found (i.e., expat clubs, international schools, local sports/hobby clubs, business networks, and local expat websites), but even just a list of useful websites is a step in the right direction and shows that you and your company are making an effort.

Home on the Post

Adjusting to the culture of a destination can be one of the most difficult pieces of an international assignment for an expatriate family. A family's failure to acclimate to their new environment can lead to assignment failure. In contemplating ways to ease the process of immersion in a new culture, relocation professionals ought to examine the practices of the U.S. government's Community Liaison Office (CLO), run by the Family Liaison Office for the Department of State.

The CLO is specifically geared toward supporting members of the Foreign Service and their families. CLO coordinators are present at overseas posts to work with community members in maintaining “high morale through orientation

activities, cultural and recreational programs, dissemination of information, counseling and referral, and assistance with security, education, and employment for family members,” according to the CLO website.

Services fall under eight categories that are variable depending on location.

- Welcoming and orientation. The CLO is the greeting party for fresh arrivals at the post, offering information and resources to assist in acclimation to the new environment. CLO workers arrange sponsorship programs, welcome activities, and, for those departing, repatriation workshops.
- Employment liaison. CLO workers advocate and advertise for family member employment within the mission and in the local economy, and when necessary seek alternative employment options such as tele-work and home-based business. In addition, the CLO educates family members on employment programs managed by the Department of State and assists them in applying for functional training.
- Education liaison. The CLO provides information on schooling options to families while maintaining liaison with local educational institutions. In addition, the CLO manages support programs for youths at the post and provides resources for child care.
- Information and resource management. The CLO maintains a community resource center with Internet and intranet access.
- Guidance and referral. The CLO offers confidential counseling to and seeks resources for individuals regarding such issues as divorce, spouse/child abuse, adoption, death, and mental health concerns. Also, the CLO will issue referrals when appropriate and act as a representative before post management.
- Community liaison. The CLO cultivates relationships with community organizations and local resources that can benefit members of the post.
- Events planning. The CLO plans events and programs that enlighten post members on host-country culture, as well as U.S. traditions. Social, educational, and recreational activities are organized, and volunteerism is encouraged.
- Crisis management and security liaison. It is the CLO's duty to relay critical security information to the community from post management and be the advocate for community concerns during crises. The CLO also is responsible for ensuring crisis preparedness and providing emergency evacuation information through community meetings and seminars, as well as rebuilding the community in the aftermath of a crisis.

4. Give golden contacts. Useful names and contact numbers are like pots of gold to newly-arrived expats and their families. The more golden contacts you give your outbound employees, the happier you make them and the better you are at laying the groundwork for their successful assignments.

For example, you easily can find key contact information if your organization already has offices in that location. In this scenario, the existing office/network can provide most/all of the key contact names. Other times, you may need to look online and/or network yourself to find this information. These days, you can connect with people in the global mobility industry in different parts of the world via the Internet, conferences, friends of your contacts, and so on, to find useful contact information to share with your outbound employees. Developing relationships with your peers and allies around the world in both the human resource (HR) and relocation industries and/or the specific industry of your company, is a low-cost, grassroots approach to help you gain useful contact information and insights for your expats—without always having to pay for the privilege.

5. Create a networking safety net. Okay, so you have fully-equipped your expats and sent them on their merry ways. The only thing left to do now is to ensure that you have included yourself/your representative in your expats' support network—similar to a safety net. Granted, you may consider this time-consuming and wish to outsource the task; however, beware that cutting off this direct networking arm also may cut you out of the loop with regard to knowing just which expats and/or their families are overwhelmed and thinking of leaving their assignments.

Being available to listen to your assignees and their families is critical and should be

an ongoing strategy embedded into your organization. Is it not better to invest some energy as a member of your expat's ongoing support network than to lose the assignee when the next headhunter calls promising happiness and fortune at the end of the competitor's rainbow?

Best Practices

The best organizational example of networking assistance that we have seen comes from the U.S. Family Liaison Office (FLO), Washington, DC, (See sidebar) which serves U.S. government employees and their family members assigned to, serving at, or returning from a U.S. embassy or consulate abroad. More specifically, it is their Community Liaison Office (CLO) program, which boasts CLOs at more than 200 posts worldwide that really serves as a shining example of the importance of, and commitment to, supporting assignees overseas.

"[Our CLOs] provide services and support in eight program areas: family member employment, [which is a] critical issue; education; crisis management and security liaison; guidance and referral; welcome and orientation; information and resource management; community liaison; and events planning," said Ann Greenberg, FLO director. "The CLO can make a tremendous difference in how easily an employee and/or family makes the transition, and adapts to the new posting.... This support has paid off in terms of enabling employees to take on more difficult assignments while knowing that their families are being assisted by the department."

While an extensive CLO program might not be in your company's budget, taking on certain aspects of the CLO/networking program and/or partnering with other companies to provide similar CLO/networking services, could help both your expats—and your bottom line.

Making a Positive Difference

There are many things you can do to help increase your expat assignment success rate. Once you have covered the essentials (such as salary, residency, and immigration issues), perhaps the most basic way that you can make a positive difference is by helping your expats to network. From our experience, strong emotional, social, and professional support networks abroad are a key ingredient to expat assignment success, and could be just the secret that you have been looking for to improve expat assignment and retention rates.

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