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How prepared are global HR managers?

Lack of training and experience in global HR can have dire consequences for both companies and the families they send abroad. But as Robin Pascoe reports, many HR professionals admit they aren't prepared to manage global assignments.



While there are a growing number of companies turning to outside service providers to help them with the more intricate details of the global assignment, there are still many HR professionals who are the first to admit they know a lot of general HR matters, but are inexperienced with international challenges.



At a recent seminar held for HR managers of global companies based in Vancouver, Canada, participants openly admitted that it's not uncommon for HR to unexpectedly receive the file of an employee being assigned overseas and be told to set the wheels in motion.



If that HR person has never lived abroad on assignment or hasn't managed many global assignments, limited experience or knowledge can cause many headaches for the company.



What are some of those headaches? According to Gail Reinhart, a former HR manager in Canada's oil patch of Calgary and now a consultant in international mobility services for Runzheimer, there can be many.

"Compensation, including housing, goods and services allowances, as well as tax issues, are usually the most important things in the transferee's mind and these are areas that most companies realize they need to address properly," she says.

"But there are many other issues such as immigration, benefits, pensions, safety and security, spousal/family issues and finally repatriation/succession planning which are all complex and tend to be overlooked."

Avoiding distress - and danger

As just one of many examples, Reinhart points to the consequences when an inexperienced HR manager doesn't approach the immigration and visa issues for a transferee in the proper manner.



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"I know of clients who have had their employees arrested in a country or turned back at the point of entry. In these cases, it may not only cause the company to lose precious time, but it can cause very high stress for a family. As well, it can be a very dangerous situation and could potentially blacklist a company for years from working in a country."

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Reinhart also believes that HR managers need to brush up on safety and security issues to better brief transferees. "Safety and security is of high importance at the moment, but in the past, it has been something that was usually not addressed until there was a moment of crisis," she says.

"If employees and their families are sent to a country considered high risk because of the political situation or high crime rates, they could be at risk for kidnappings, muggings and break-ins to homes and vehicles."

Reinhart cautions it is better to counsel employees and their families prior to their departure rather than have them exposed to those kinds of possibilities. Clearly, HR people need to do their homework.

The case for an academic approach

Many managers scoff at the idea of studying international HR (that's if they can find a course to begin with) and believe on the job experience is the best route to go. And even some people who do choose the academic route admit that course shouldn't be the end of the story.

"The expat experience is too unique to ever really think you can grasp it by just reading about it," says Yvonne McNulty, an Australian expat living in the US who studied HR as an undergraduate and now for her honours research is examining expatriate spouse management.

"I know of clients who have had their employees arrested in a country or turned back at the point of entry. In these cases, it may not only cause the company to lose precious time, but it can cause very high stress for a family."

"But I think if you are tasked with international HR and you don't have personal experience, studying the subject is a good start. Doing nothing and applying HR policies and practices to a global situation because you don't know any better, can do a lot more harm than good," she says.

McNulty and Reinhart agree there are ways for HR managers to educate themselves without going back to

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school.

They point to organizations like the American Society for Human Resource Management, which includes an annual Global Forum (www.shrmglobal.org) as well as the Employee Relocation Council (www.erc.org), which has an international symposium every year.

In the future, Reinhart believes more courses on international HR management will begin popping up. "Once business recognizes the importance of having HR staff strategically knowledgeable in the area of global assignments, I believe more and more institutions of higher learning will tailor their HR degrees to include the international piece."

Robin Pascoe is the author of three books on expatriate adjustment. She regularly speaks to HR audiences. For more information, visit www.expert.com.

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