

Effective HR Support for International Assignees

By Gail Rabasca & Sheila Burns

It seems that every individual or family that has ever been on an international assignment has a personal horror story. Beyond the challenges of any relocation—learning a new job, moving household goods, finding a home and tending to a family in upheaval—assignees and families are typically in culture shock, attempting to adjust to new environment and, potentially, a different language.

Problems that would seem routine at home can loom as insurmountable obstacles in an assignment location. And since assignees may not be familiar with all the rules and regulations of the host location, they may rely on the company to keep them informed. When this communication is inaccurate or absent, HR managers responsible for international assignees can end up with horror stories of their own.

Compared to domestic relocations, human resources plays a quite different and more encompassing role in supporting international assignments. International HR work is fundamentally about supporting families—not just employees. International assignment managers must meet the family's relocation and HR needs during the course of a one- to five-year assignment, not the typical six-month cycle of a domestic move. So how can companies meet the challenge of creating and administering a high-quality human resources support system for international assignees—and minimize those horror stories?

SELECT ASSIGNMENT MANAGERS WHO ARE MOST LIKELY TO SUCCEED

Companies that manage international assignments well understand that not every HR professional has the skills necessary to work with international assignees. A good assignment manager not only is a capable HR generalist, but also has some understanding of accounting, expense management, taxation, international currency exchange, immigration requirements and banking. With a typical three-year assignment costing \$1.2 million, assignment managers must be comfortable with numbers!

Assignment managers need superior fact-finding and communication skills. They must be capable of handling crises calmly and efficiently. They need the ability to combine just the right amount of empathy with a pragmatic emphasis on solutions. They must be comfortable operating within the confines of well-defined policies and practices, and at the same time, have the ability to create effective solutions to unforeseen situations. Above, all, they must be

CASE #1: The Lieberman family is scheduled to move to Vienna in time for their children to start school on September 4. It is August 15 and they just got a call from the school saying that because they had not gotten the deposit for Hannah's spot in the third-grade class, they took another student. The class is now filled and Hannah is wait-listed.



highly flexible and not expect to stick to their job description or their regular working hours. The demands made of international assignment managers are complex and challenging. The best assignment managers get a high degree of job and personal satisfaction from knowing they have made it easier for the employee and family to succeed in their international assignment.

Human resources departments are expected to act as the internal advocate for the employee while actively keeping the best interests of the company at the forefront. It is a delicate and challenging balance, particularly when advocating on behalf of their

CASE #2: Bill Johnson's landlord just sent a very angry letter saying the rent paid by his wife's company was late for the third month in a row and short by €30 because her company can't seem to get the wire fees right. He's demanding that the family move when their lease expires in 60 days.

expatriate population. When sending employees on international assignment, the company is committing to a large expense while asking these employees to uproot their entire family and live in a country and culture that is often unknown. They should have an advocate within the organization to drive the appropriate support services while remaining fiscally responsible and within the confines of company culture and corporate responsibility.

This internal champion does not necessarily have to have been an expatriate himself, though the experience of living and working abroad makes for a better-informed champion with first-hand experience from which to draw in lobbying for expatriate benefits. This person should have strong relationships with internal stakeholders, branch offices and international operations to ensure a consistent and quality-driven package of benefits. Equally important, the champion should conduct regular due diligence to benchmark company policies against best practices within the specific industry segment, ensuring the company remains competitive in recruiting and retaining global employees.

ASSIGNEES VIEW YOUR SUPPLIERS AS PART OF YOUR ORGANIZATION: SELECT AND MANAGE THEM ACCORDINGLY

A network of outstanding service providers is essential to high quality support for international assignments. Since they are entrusted with critical assignment management processes, such as securing work permits and visas, they must be fully experienced and competent in their service area. They also need to be reliable, trustworthy and deliver on their commitments each and every time.

It's important to remember that these service providers will interact with your employee and their families, making them a virtual extension of your company. As such, selection should be driven at least as much by quality as by price. You wouldn't hire a mediocre job candidate simply because he commanded a 25 percent lower salary than the more capable candidates. The lowest-cost provider may neither have the level of expertise you require nor provide the degree of support you expect your assignees to receive.

Thorough vetting and reference checks are essential, especially with service providers. Be sure they understand how and when you want them to communicate with employees, your service expectations and authorizations; and their billing and reporting commitments. HR teams that manage their service providers well have clear performance metrics and conduct periodic performance reviews. They also solicit feedback from their assignees on individual partner services provided, not just overall satisfaction with the assignment management.

IMPLEMENT ASSIGNMENT POLICIES THAT SUIT YOUR CULTURE AND BUSINESS OBJECTIVES

Written policies for international relocation, assignment administration and assignment taxation are essential for professional management of international assignments. They provide a framework for all decision-making and administration, helping to ensure that assignees are treated fairly and equitably. As such, they should be simple to administer and easy for your employees to understand.

The best policies are aligned with, and support, a company's broader human resources strategic objectives

CASE #3: Christine D'Amato is on assignment in Vladivostok. As a single employee, with minimal Russian language skills, she's isolated and often lonely. Her annual performance review and raise were due three weeks ago and she hasn't heard a thing about them.

CASE #4: Henry Campbell is meeting with a placement agency in Greece about finding a job since his wife is on assignment in Athens. He's surprised to learn that as the spouse of a work permit holder, he's not allowed to seek paid employment in the country.

and unique culture. Adapting a policy from a supplier or a colleague at another company is not likely to save you time or money in the long run, as it may not reflect your company's unique situation and may not optimally support your goals. A policy for an organization that sends senior managers on assignment to align global strategy, culture and operations may look very different from that of a company that sends new managers on a series of international assignments to learn how its business functions around the world.

EMPLOY CLEAR AND CONCISE BUSINESS PROCESSES

Clear and concise business processes are essential to properly implement your assignment policies and meet the HR needs of assignees in a timely manner. Best practice processes:

- Help manage complexity and communications;
- Ensure that the right services and information are delivered at the right time;
- Map interactions with stakeholders in assignment support processes, ranging from the legal department, to procurement, to cash management and international banking;
- Clearly define the roles of the home and host country support managers to ensure process, data integrity and financial controls;
- Define the scope of services and performance expectations for outside service providers such as moving companies, payroll agents and tax preparers; and
- Create a single point of accountability for the international assignee, reducing the amount of time and energy the assignee must spend on the details of his or her relocation and assignment support.

CASE #5: Brent Stevens is his company's country manager in Afghanistan. One of his employees was injured in a car accident this morning. The employee is recovering in the hospital but they are demanding an immediate cash payment and insurance information from Brent.

Some processes will be used every day but months or even years may go by before a work permit is needed to send an employee to Bangladesh again. High performance international HR teams have a method to capture operational and organizational knowledge and leverage it to meet future needs.

MANAGE INFORMATION EFFECTIVELY

Best practice support of international assignees is an active process; it does not rely on prompts from the assignee to trigger events in his or her HR lifecycle. In fact, companies that are adept at supporting international assignees keep track of a massive amount of detailed data over an extended period

of time. An HR manager supporting international assignees must know at a glance when the next raise is due, when the work permit expires, when home and host country tax returns are due and a host of other recurring and non-recurring events that must take place. Fortunately, several software tools can simplify record keeping and tracking for each assignee, flagging assignment milestones and making it far easier to provide proactive assignment support.

Beyond these more predictable assignment events, responsive international HR organizations have the superior research capabilities and problem-solving skills needed to address new and unusual situations quickly and efficiently. While the basic processes might be the same, each assignment location has its own maze of legal and administrative rules and regulations.

International assignment managers need to determine the requirements for each new location; usually they are given little lead time to get up to speed. A framework for country research can shorten the learning curve but creativ-

ity is often required to obtain details. Strong research skills improve response times, ensuring that all the bases are covered legally and logistically. They also validate the competency and professionalism of the HR support team.

SAFEGUARD THE VAST AMOUNT OF PERSONAL DATA YOU HOLD ON INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNEES

With the increased use of technology in HR management and administration, the duty of an employer to safeguard employee records has taken on a new urgency. The news is full of accounts

CASE #6: The Schmidt family just moved home to Munich after a three-year assignment in Kenya. They closed on their new house yesterday and are anxious to move in today. After waiting several hours for their goods to be delivered from storage they learn that the delivery was never scheduled and their furniture can't be delivered for at least another week.

of missing or stolen employee records, including Social Security numbers and other sensitive information. Employees expect (and the laws of many countries require) a company to take extra measures to protect personal and employment data. HRIS systems, employee Web portals, vendor portals and other innovations that facilitate communication also make it easier for information to fall into the wrong hands.

Given the higher level of support required for international assignees, HR professionals typically work with highly personal information to which an employee would not be privy to in domestic employment situations. For example, an international assignment manager will often have medical information, details of children's special educational requirements and information on past marriages and the nature of personal relationships.

Maintaining confidentiality is a professional and ethical obligation of all HR practitioners but it becomes even more important in managing international assignments. HR managers must continually be on guard not to disclose information to anyone without a legitimate need to know. Companies must also balance their rules and practices on documentation with the possibility that some information regarding international assignees is best kept nowhere other than in the memory of their assignment manager.

KEEP IN TOUCH AND AVERT A HOST OF PROBLEMS

Good international assignment support requires regular, proactive contact with assignees and their families throughout the assignment. The simple question, "So, how are things going?" can often reveal issues that are causing difficulty for the family that an HR manager can fix with relative ease. It may also uncover more serious concerns that require referral to EAP programs, counseling and other outside assistance.

A routine phone call can defuse many concerns before they become substantial enough to threaten the assignment. It can also remove annoying distractions and allow the assignee to

focus on the new position. Building rapport in this way helps to ensure that the assignee or family will be comfortable with calling HR when they encounter sticky situations.

REMEMBER THAT INTERNATIONAL HR RESPONSIBILITIES DON'T END WITH THE ASSIGNMENT

Successful assignment management turns as much on careful repatriation planning as on planning for the assignment itself. In fact, repatriation plan-

ning should begin before the assignee's departure for the host country. While it's often impossible to identify the precise role an assignee will assume upon his or her return, long-term succession planning should be part of any company's strategic plan.

Additionally, formal mentoring programs help assignees feel like part of your organization throughout their assignment, reducing frustration and disillusionment. Upon repatriation, if career planning has taken place and

a mentor has regularly communicated with the assignee, he or she will be more likely to bring invaluable global knowledge to your company—not to a competitor.

TAKE A STRATEGIC VIEW

In recent years, human resources has moved beyond its support role and has become an integral part of corporations' strategic globalization efforts. While reasons for foreign service deployment vary from company to company, the common thread—no matter what business or industry segment—is the development of future leaders of your company.

Recruiting your industry's "best and brightest" is only the first step, and growing, retaining and supporting them are key to any company's strategy for success. When your company decides to invest millions of dollars to deploy employees internationally, it only makes sense to invest in high quality human resources support for them throughout their assignment. Utilizing the tools and expertise now available to support both the HR function and your expatriate population will help ensure your competitive advantage in the marketplace and protect your return on investment. ■

Gail Rabasca, GMS, is vice president of Global Service for Mobility Services International. She can be reached at gailrabasca@msimobility.com.

Sheila M. Burns, SPHR, is a principal of Global Human Resource Options, LLC. She can be reached at sheila@globalhroptions.com.