

MANAGING CHANGE IN EMPLOYEE PSYCHOLOGY ON REPATRIATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to conceptualize how a realistic view of the situation for the repatriate can help the companies to face the challenge of maintaining the retention rate of the employees after international assignments. Understanding of the repatriation process is crucial to offering repatriating employees proper backing and moral support needed during the process. A thorough review of the literature on repatriation is carried out to present model on repatriation process and propositions to minimize reverse culture shock.

This paper suggests that by focusing on individual employees' experience of the repatriation process, researchers and practitioners will be better able to understand the measures and support needed in the repatriation process to increase the employee retention of an organization. Implications for culture shock recovery measures are also discussed to help employees and career counselors understand the impact of working internationally.

This research paper combines existing knowledge with new insights for understanding the repatriation process and retention strategies of employees with foreign assignments.

Keywords: Repatriation process, Employee attitudes , Reverse culture shock, Employee Retention

INTRODUCTION

Expatriation is the process of sending managers to another country to run a subsidiary of a multinational organization. Before departure, the process includes an extensive period of training and preparation to ensure that the managers are familiar with cultural differences and to reduce the likelihood of culture shock. On completion of the international assignment the expatriates return home and then the process of repatriation begins. Having in mind that the company has spend a huge amount of money on his or her expatriates, on average it costs two to three times more than having the same employee working in his or her home country, the repatriation process has to be studied carefully (Black and Gregersen 1999). Companies often under estimate the repatriation process because the employees are just “coming back home” so there are supposed to be no difficulties in adjusting to their own environment (Stroh et al. 1998; Adler 1981; Tung 1997).

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There is a tendency that employees who have been sent to work abroad are more likely to seek for new job opportunities than the ones who have not (Stroh 1995). Black and Gregersen (1999) show in their study that 25% of the repatriates left their companies within one year of repatriation which is twice as much as the once who have not experienced expatriation. There are different reasons for the resignation of the employees. Some suggest that the repatriates do not see any career opportunities in the companies they are working for (Paik, Segaud & Malinowski 2002), others argue that the main reason is the lack of a repatriation program (Hurn 1999).

It has been argued that one of the most important aspects of returning home is the career management process (Solomon, 2001). Black et al.'s (1992b) theoretical framework of repatriation adjustment to explore implications for career management for employees with international work experience. First, the fundamental premises of the theory will be outlined. Second, variables contributing to repatriation adjustment will be introduced, and other research will be incorporated to connect repatriation issues to individual and organizational career management.

Galen Tinder (2007) defined reverse culture shock i.e. change in employee psychology "as many people living in a host country for several years experience what one repatriate called a "transformational" process."

When immersed in a culture different from their own they go undergo a broadening of mind and outlook. It's often more than the enrichment of living in a different culture. Some have epiphanies—they finally "get it" that what they have always taken for granted as the world as it is constitutes only an infinitesimal slice of the human experience. For Americans, as an example, one part of this epiphany is really taking in for the first time that world history did not begin with the American Revolution.

Misleading memories- on another level, most expatriates do miss home. So much so, in fact, that with the passage of time tricks of memory enhances its plain, prosaic realities. Homesick expatriates develop "myths about the general environment and culture of their home country" that no reality can match. (Bringing Them Home Again by Aaron Andreason and Kevin Kinneer, Industrial Management, Dec .2004). When they do return home the pleasant myths and heightened memories quickly succumb to plain facts. The reality they encounter can't equal the myths their mind has woven.

Three pronged problems faced by employees on repatriation (galen tinder, 2007)

Change happens- this disconnects between myth and reality takes place not only in the mind of the repatriate but also in the fact that even the reality they left has changed. It is not just a matter of the new supermarket where the old grammar school was razed, the duplication of route one, the modernistic renovations to First Community Church and the annoying traffic light interrupting the flow of main street traffic. It's also the people. Some of the old friends and acquaintances have departed and been replaced by outsiders. Others have found new, time-consuming pursuits and aren't available much. With others it is just hard to reconnect.

Unwelcome lifestyle changes- On a practical level, unpleasant adjustments in lifestyle may prove necessary. While on foreign assignment the employee and family are often able to live

in a semi-luxury that can't be sustained in the home country. After returning to the US following seven years abroad, one woman, self-sufficient in many ways, sheepishly admitted that one of the most jarring adjustments of her resettlement in the US was the absence of domestic help. Ironically, along with the absence of maids repatriates may miss rubbing shoulders with that slice of the intellectual and cultural elite found in many expatriate communities but seemingly in short supply back home.

Meeting same people again- many repatriates could gladly dispense with the elites if only the non-elites with whom they have reunited were more interested in their slide shows of foreign fauna and stories of what at the time seemed like grand adventures. But they are immersed in their own worlds and activities. They will stand tight for the punchy 30 second story, but lengthier accounts missing any pungent point elicit frozen smiles and antsy feet. Repats are often astounded at the incuriousness of most people. They feel discounted, and perhaps hurt and angry.

Loneliness-To top it all off, what saved them, as novice expats when they last felt as lousy as they do now is not available. When expats ask what they miss most about their global experience many cite the closely-knit expatriate community. They realize now that it was artificial in some ways, but it was also warm, vivid, embracing and fun. Even if wild beasts had prowled the outer walls of the expatriate compound and mandated convivial togetherness, they still felt cared for and safe. This community, forged by the commonality of a tiny minority in a strange land, has no equivalent at home.

The 2006 ERC Global Benchmarking Survey found that two-thirds of the Human Resources respondents believed international assignments essential to career mobility in their companies. But immediately upon their return many repatriates are alarmed to find that nobody knows what to do with them. They are stuck in lower level, temporary jobs that nobody knows the precise duration of. The old position is gone, either filled or absorbed by other functions and a job of equal challenge and authority did not materialize in honor of his return. (Maaike Platenburg, Expatica, 2006).

Pre-expatriation activities

1. Pre-departure briefings and meetings are necessarily focused on the upcoming expatriate experience but should include preliminary information on expatriacy, especially on preparing the expats-to-be to develop realistic expectations of their post assignment life back home. Expatriates to be must understand that these sessions should be mandatory for employees and family members who are also making the trip.
2. An in-depth review of the employee's goals and responsibilities while globally deployed should include establishing written processes by which employee performance and progress are monitored. While care should be taken not to impede, evaluative functions of the host office. But host offices don't always have a person suited to manage expatriates and on issues of job expectation and performance it is important for the future repatriate to maintain ties with home country management.
3. Mentoring, according to nearly everyone who has studied the vocational plight of repats agrees that mentoring is critical. In her article on the subject (Expatica.com, 2005) Pauline Cowell suggests that mentoring relationships be kept informal in

deference to everyone's time constraints. However, the mentoring function is too critical to leave to the vagaries of informality. Mentor and mentee should meet before the expatriate's departure to build their relationship and agree on the nature and frequency of their contacts over the coming several years. Ideally, the mentor should be somebody positioned to speak knowledgably about company changes and to serve as the employee's advocate when necessary.

4. The repat's exact position upon return to the home country cannot yet be determined. But it is not premature for the company and employee to have preliminary conversation about the kind of position that will benefit both parties. It is unrealistic to expect the company to guarantee a particular job three years hence. There is too much likelihood of change, within both the company and employee.

While employees are on global assignment

1. Assuming that a strong foundation was laid pre-departure, the time on assignment will involve largely carrying out the established plans.
2. Since the more contact the better, it is a good idea for the employee to visit home base and to host return visits from home office personnel as often as possible.
3. Discussion of concrete job prospects about six months prior to repatriation the employee and the home office should discuss concrete job opportunities. At three months the employee should know the position he will assume. At the two-month mark the employee and family should attend several hours of reentry orientation training during which they learn about and discuss the issues raised in this exploration.
4. At three to six months partners who plan to work once back on home turf should begin working with a career and relocation consultant. Among other things, the consultant can help the partner prepare for a changed job market. Although space has not permitted a full examination of the partner's needs along these and other lines, his or her concerns are as worthy of company attention as are the employee's.

Repatriation adjustments

Multi-faceted phenomenon includes adjustment to work, adjustment to interacting with home nationals, and adjustment to the environment and culture. Repatriation adjustment is thought to be affected by four variables:

- a. Individual variables include a person's attitudes, values, needs, or characteristics.
- b. Job variables refer to the tasks and characteristics of the individual's job.
- c. Organizational variables which are the characteristics of the home country organization.
- d. Non-work variables that involve repatriates' friends, family, and general environment.

These four variables inform our discussion of worker adjustment and career planning strategies.

Individual variables

Individual variables impacting anticipatory repatriation adjustment include the amount of time spent abroad, the amount of change which has occurred at home during this time, and the number and length of visits home (Black et al., 1992b). The degree of change at home may be more important to the formation of accurate anticipatory expectations than the length of time away. Findings also indicate that more organizational change is negatively associated with work adjustment (Feldman and Tompson, 1993).

Repatriates may not realize how they have personally changed, or these changes may not have been salient during expatriation, but become highlighted upon returning home. Psychological changes occur for repatriates as a result of living and working internationally. What repatriates perceive as external changes may in fact be changes within themselves (Martin and Harrell, 1996). For example, Sussman (2001) found some American repatriates had changes in self-concept and cultural identity and Adler (1981) found that awareness of change was related to ratings of effectiveness in the workplace. Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999) identify psychological adaptation during cross-cultural transitions as a measure of emotional well being. Theoretical approaches to repatriation adjustment need to emphasize the fact that “the nature of re-entry transition is better demarcated as a psychological process than a physical relocation” (Arthur, 2003, p. 52). Although there are many facets of repatriation adjustment (Black et al., 1992b), psychological adjustment appears to be a key factor in work adjustment.

Black et al. (1992a) contend that people in unfamiliar environments need to regain both predictive and behavioural control: predictive control is the ability to interpret one’s environment by anticipating how one is expected to act; and behavioural control is the ability to manage one’s own behaviours which impact the environment. Additional literature on cross-cultural transitions tends to focus on factors which help predict the adjustment outcomes for individuals (Ward and Kennedy, 1996). The primary theoretical process related to repatriation adjustment is uncertainty reduction; factors that reduce uncertainty facilitate adjustment, while factors increasing uncertainty inhibit adjustment (Black et al., 1992b). Individual variables affecting in-country repatriation adjustment include the returnee’s need for control and self-efficacy (Black et al., 1992b).

Organizations can prepare the returning expatriate for changes that can impact their expectations and subsequent work adjustment. Black et al. (1992b) recommend regular exposure to the home country and domestic office to facilitate accurate work expectations. Returning workers are concerned with the ways international assignments will impact their subsequent career development and whether their career development expectations will be met (Yan et al., 2002). Goals can be established for home business visits, including re-establishing formal and informal networks, becoming appraised of business changes and opportunities, learning new technologies, and reviewing foreign assignment goals (Stoltz-Loike, 1998).

Job variables

Although Black et al. (1992b) believe similarities in work duties will facilitate expectations and adjustment, many repatriates find discontinuities between the domestic and international positions, and feel a loss of momentum in their careers (Adler, 1981; Black and Gregersen,

1999b). Research on the connection between foreign work assignments and long-term career goals shows a positive association with expectations, work performance, skill acquisition, and job satisfaction (Hammer et al., 1998). Briody and Baba (1991) found repatriates who were satisfied with their jobs utilized their skills and experience, and reported their work was interesting and rewarding, whereas dissatisfied repatriates were in jobs that did not meet their expectations, were not using their skills and experience, and believed their international experience was not career enhancing.

Perhaps the best way to achieve these goals is through planned career development (Baruch et al., 2002). Planning can help to establish matches between organizational objectives and employee career goals and help to track employee competencies gained through international work assignments. These may include knowledge of other languages, the ability to work with people from other cultures (MacDonald and Arthur, 2004), and skills for managing international transitions (Arthur, 2002). Organizations can benefit from a database of repatriate skills which can be collected through ongoing surveys and interviews (O'Connor, 2002).

Organizational variables

Addressing painful issues of repatriation is not the responsibility of the company alone. But if looking for a rationale for action, companies can review Michael Harvey's 1989 study, in which he says, "The work-role transition that repatriation represents is of great importance for the company because of the vast amount of financial resources invested in the person during the foreign assignment. It is a huge investment, and due to this, a "return on investment" in which the employee puts into practice his or her newly acquired knowledge or experience is expected." (Journal of International Business Studies). In short, to preserve their ROI companies need to take decisive steps to prevent widespread repatriate disaffection. Fortunately, the causes of repatriate disaffection are straightforward and so are the remedies. Companies need to close the gap between expectation and reality. In some cases information and education can bring expectations into conformance with reality. In others companies need to bring reality into closer proximity with expectation. With intentionality and planning, both can be accomplished. According to H.L. Sullivan, writing in 2002, a successful repatriation is "one in which, upon return, the repatriate: gains access to a job which recognizes any newly acquired international competences, experiences minimal cross-culture readjustment difficulties; and reports low turnover intentions." Companies can help produce such happy outcomes with a modicum of planning.

Non-work variables

There are three non-work variables repatriates need to consider, including: cultural distance; decreases in social status and housing conditions; and spousal adjustment (Black et al., 1992b). It is generally accepted that the greater the difference between the home and host cultures, the more that employees have to change (Black et al., 1992a; Ward and Kennedy, 1996, 1999). Consequently, the transition home can involve "unlearning" (Bridges, 2004), and gaining knowledge about the home culture from a new perspective. Berry (1997) refers to this practice as culture learning, whereby new behaviours are acquired which are appropriate to the new culture, and culture shedding, which involves changing aspects of one's behavioural repertoire that were previously beneficial. For example, Black et al.

(1992a) report most repatriates find it difficult to give up the autonomy they experienced abroad, and are reluctant to relearn bureaucratic ways of doing business upon return.

Regardless of the number of non-work adjustment issues, there are numerous strategies that can be used to facilitate the re-entry process. These include debriefing, allowing the employee some time off to deal with the relocation, and having the employee connect with other repatriates who have had similar experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. One of the most common repatriate complaints is that the talent and expertise gained while on global assignment is not put to use upon return. To reduce this complaint attentive company officials can provide repatriates with speaking opportunities regarding application of foreign inputs by sponsoring seminars, lunch on Q&A sessions.
2. Within one to two weeks of repatriation the employee and family can be invited to attend a day of activities that includes an informal debriefing on the expatriate experience, open conversation on what repatriation has been like so far, training on reverse culture shock from somebody who has experienced it and, if at all possible, informal conversation with other employees and family members about the jolts of repatriation.
3. The early reentry phase of repatriation is not known to promote a high level of intimate partner-to-partner sharing. Both parties are under strain and understandably preoccupied with their own agendas. Though solid figures are hard to come by, the coming months can be martially vulnerable.
4. There should now be no unpleasant surprises. Casual friends may not badger them for slide shows or for detailed characterizations of host country foliage but the returnees will know that this has nothing to do with them, but is simple how things are.

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