

FALLING OFF THE RADAR SCREEN: COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES WITH INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNEES AND MANAGERS

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With the increase of globalization, companies are deploying employees in greater numbers and to a broad array of host destinations. Maintaining an ongoing two-way communication effort with assignees and their managers has become a growing challenge. Given the high cost of sending employees overseas—particularly if their family goes along—companies that neglect communications with deployed staff run the risk of having disenchanted expatriates and a negative impact on the company's bottom line.

A key aspect of ensuring the success of international assignments is obtaining honest feedback from both expatriates and line managers about their concerns. Satisfaction (or, opinion) surveys provide the opportunity to acquire genuine responses about the international program, which HR can then use as part of an ongoing improvement process.

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MAXIMIZING THE USEFULNESS OF A SATISFACTION SURVEY

Opinion surveys allow an employer to question all internationally assigned employees or some/one of the increasing diversity of assignee groups—short-term, intra-regional, repatriated, long-term, commuters, and “in-patriates” (even expatriate spouses). Comparing the differences and similarities in their responses can provide invaluable feedback on areas of the assignment program that are working well or trouble spots that are just beginning to emerge (or, perhaps, growing more severe). The answers may also point to gaps in policy provisions—for example, assistance for children's education in less-developed countries that might not offer adequate facilities.

However, to get the right answers to survey questions, you have to carefully consider what you are trying to find out. From a general perspective, one needs to ask:

- What do I really want to know?

- What information is critical in order to give a complete picture of how effectively our international assignment programs are being managed and perceived by the stakeholders?

And, in particular, with regards to an international assignment program, the questions might include some of the following:

- Do your expatriates find your policy clear and easy to understand? Or are they constantly coming back with more questions?
- Are expatriates satisfied with their assignment package terms and conditions? Or do they feel the package is unfair or uncompetitive (whether or not it's true)?
- Do expatriates and their families feel that they have enough support from HR, line managers, and external vendors (e.g., immigration, cultural and language orientation, settling in) throughout the relocation process? Or do they feel abandoned?

- Are HR and line management's roles clearly defined with regard to relocation, expatriate support, and repatriation? Or do certain functions fall between the gaps?
- How well are your employees satisfied with the service providers you are using? Or do they have ongoing complaints about service and reliability?
- What do expatriates and management think are the strengths of your expatriate program? Or the weaknesses?
- Is it likely that your repatriated employees will accept another international assignment? Or have they been so

disillusioned that they would rather stay at home?

The answers to such questions will help design a survey that will produce the most focused and relevant information. But remember a key point: Make sure you give participants a chance to tell you what is really on their minds and offer suggestions for improving the assignment program for themselves and future expatriates. The answers can be enlightening. (See sidebar, "Case Study: Work-Life Balance.")

COMMUNICATION LENDS CREDIBILITY

The results of a satisfaction survey can be tremendously valuable in

identifying critical issues that affect both expatriates and line managers. They are a useful tool to show management what changes, if any, need to be made to your policy to develop a more productive and motivated workforce.

But beyond management, an important use of the study results is to show participants that the company cares about their opinion and intends to do something about their concerns—to the extent that changes are possible and reasonable. The bottom line is simply this: If you are going to ask questions, be ready and willing to deal with the answers—or lose all credibility with employees and managers alike.

CASE STUDY: WORK-LIFE BALANCE

In 2007, ORC Worldwide conducted the *Expatriate Work-Life Balance Survey*, sponsored by Industrial Relations Counselors, Inc. With technology increasing the pace of working life, the speed of communications has accelerated, driving the expectation of immediate or near-immediate responses. This new work environment has led to a 24-hour-a-day/7-day-a-week culture and mentality, blurring the distinction between work and leisure. While providing flexibility on the one hand, it creates a tension between the working environment and home life on the other. Adding to the pressure, short-term, commuter, and frequent-flyer style assignments all affect work-life balance in terms of travel time and separation from families.

One topic the survey explored involved whether companies had any policies in place to address work-life balance issues—for example, maternity/paternity leave, flexible working hours, condensed workweek, working from home, and part-time work. The survey asked participants whether their organization had such policies. What was telling is that nearly half of the expatriates surveyed (44%) did not know the answer. This uncertainty indicates the need for clear communication to employees as to whether a policy is in place, its purpose, and its components. Here's what some of the respondents had to say:

- "I'm not able to describe components, though I know that many options are available (and formally described) to support a good balance between work and private life."
- "If there is one, it has never been applied to the field, except as observed in its breach."
- "I do not know if my company has a policy or not. In general, expatriates do not have any written policy on anything at the corporate level, but have an informal mix of written and unwritten based loosely on the policies of its divisions. Dealing with corporate on these issues takes a lot of reinventing the wheel time, due to the lack of a formal policy, frequent personnel changes at the corporate level, and the fact that none of the corporate reps have ever been an expatriate, to my knowledge."

Consequently, the survey recommended that employers "clearly communicate to expatriates whether a work-life balance policy is in place, its purpose and components, and how the organization can assist expatriates and their families while on assignment." Communication initiatives are also very important in maintaining contact with expatriates and their families, providing advice on difficulties encountered in the workplace and reducing the pressure on expatriates.