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Expatriate Assignment's Influence on Work-Life Balance

Sheri Gaster and Virginia G. McMorrow, ORC Worldwide

Proactive organizations striving for a successful expatriate program, with assignees achieving their goals, take into consideration the impact of assignment stress on the individual and family (See Figure 1). The expatriate cannot achieve — or, does so with great difficulty — corporate and individual career objectives without receiving work- and relocation-related support from headquarters and the host office. This support entails having the correct skills and competencies, preassignment preparation, career management and family assistance.

Without these elements in place, the employee's work-life balance undergoes a radical shift. Ultimately, the resulting imbalance affects the organization's bottom line, the employee's job performance and well-being and the family's happiness.

THE REQUISITE SKILLS AND/OR TRAINING

Most assignment objectives fall into common categories. For example, the company may face a particular skill gap in the host location or need to transfer a new technology to that operation. Others may focus on some form of developmental training related to the individual's career path, either early in the employee's career or later as a senior executive, advancing the individual another step up the corporate ladder. Another common task is researching and developing a market in the host location for a company product or service or, having reached that point, starting a physical operation and staffing the local

office. To meet these and other objectives, the organization should support the employee as best as possible.

Before taking on the assignment, the expatriate needs to have — or to quickly acquire — the skills and competencies to handle the specific job responsibilities, whether managerial, sales, technical or another category of work. Further, before going overseas, the expatriate should have an accurate understanding of the position responsibilities to avoid unnecessary surprises that might delay achievement of assignment objectives and cast the individual in a poor light with regards to the host operation. Conversations with both home and host management — face-to-face if possible during the pre-assignment visit — not only prove beneficial but also allow the expatriate to start becoming familiar with local colleagues before the work begins.

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC PREPARATION

Dealing with local colleagues means more than understanding the new job duties, the overall objectives of the assignment and staff members' responsibilities. While the company's relocation policy and preassignment trip needs to help the expatriate move overseas in the shortest time possible with minimal inconvenience, other issues play an important role, too. It is not only a "job" or "career" that is undergoing a shift from one place to another, but the family's emotional well-being, as well. Part of the emotional component of an international assignment entails knowing how to speak and interact with new colleagues as well as neighbors in an unfamiliar and insecure setting.

A majority of organizations pay for language lessons for the assignee and spouse if the host language is unfamiliar. Many employers extend this benefit to all family members, as language competency enhances their ability to live and work effectively in another country — ultimately, a well-justified investment of the organization's money. Many employers also use cultural orientation firms to

prepare employees and their families for the transition. A thorough introduction to the customs, values, traditions and work and personal habits of the host society can increase an expatriate's ability to work effectively with colleagues, and make family adjustments easier.

However, responses by participants in "2007 Expatriate Work-Life Balance Survey" (ORC Worldwide 2007) are troubling. Despite the majority of respondents who were offered language training and one-half who were offered cultural training, a discouraging number of expatriates did not take advantage of the benefit. Forty percent of those offered language training did not complete it, and 20 percent did not finish their cultural-training sessions. The main reasons offered for incompleteness or nonattendance included time pressures of the job, travel schedules, training schedules outside of work hours and lack of interest.

In some cases, the employer also arranges to have a destination service provider orient the family upon arrival in the assignment location during both the preassignment trip and the actual move. Their services typically involve a diversity of support, such as:

- Providing lists of books, videos and other resources
- Meeting the family on arrival in the host location
- Transporting the family to temporary housing (if its accommodations are not yet ready for occupancy) or the family's permanent residence
- Explaining day-to-day systems (e.g., mail, shopping, transportation).

CAREER AND TALENT MANAGEMENT

Over time, the family settles into the foreign home, school and (possibly) job for the spouse. For the expatriate, who has become firmly entrenched in the new position responsibilities, the issue of repatriation/reassignment and career development will arise. Proactive employers typically approach these matters

before expatriates go abroad so the assignees understand not only the career benefits (if any) they can expect from going overseas, but also what options the future might hold for them.

As the assignment continues, it is important to monitor and manage the expatriate's career through regular performance appraisals with input from home and host management. Organizations need to administer increases according to performance-appraisal guidelines and frequency, following the interaction and process that works best between home and host.

While these guidelines are sound, how do employers really address them? According to a 2006 survey (ORC Worldwide 2006):

- *Career planning.* Only 16 percent of the respondents provided formal career planning or management, while 46 percent did so informally.
- *Performance appraisal.* Seventy-five percent conducted performance reviews in the host country, and 35 percent did so in the home country. Forty-seven percent monitored performance against predefined objectives, and 28 percent evaluated assignees on a case-by-case basis.
- *Repatriation.* Only 1 percent provided advance notice of repatriation more than a year prior to the actual return. For 39 percent (the majority), timing varied. Twenty-eight percent informed the expatriate three to six months in advance, and 18 percent did so up to three months in advance.

FAMILY AND HOME-LIFE ISSUES

Personal considerations affect employees' decisions to accept or reject an international opportunity, as well as their ongoing performance in the host location. These concerns may also adversely affect the family's overall happiness and well-being. Facing an adjustment to different customs, laws, schools, living conditions, and, often, a new language, the expatriate and family

share anxiety as to how they will adapt without the usual support network of family, religious groups, clubs and friends back home. They worry about elderly relatives left behind, their home-country residence and a host of other concerns.

Spousal career issues often play a role in discontent, too. Forced to leave their current job, expatriate spouses may find that host-country laws prohibit them from working. Or, if they are permitted to work, they leave a home-country job with which they are familiar and secure, only to prove their capability again in an unfamiliar environment. Some companies allow the spouse, having the right qualifications, to work in their local office. Whatever the situation, many expatriates find this issue to be significant with regard to their (dis)satisfaction with the assignment. Many said that their spouse's role was not the same overseas, 76 percent reported stress at home, and 50 percent had financial concerns (ORC Worldwide 2007).

Work-Life Imbalance

A key concern that arises prior to, and during, the relocation is the assignment's adverse influence on the individual's work-life balance and the family relationship. Work-life balance concerns the sense of control that employees have over where, when and how they work. On an international assignment, this balance suffers from typical expatriate stress factors, exacerbated if the family is unhappy or not adjusting well. (See: "Why Expatriates Feel Greater Stress.")

Expatriates work longer hours abroad than at home — on average, an increase of 13.4 hours per week (ORC Worldwide 2007). Survey respondents cited several contributing factors:

- Volume of work (52 percent); 51 percent feel more overworked as an expatriate, and 45 percent are overwhelmed by work.

- Their own high standards (45 percent). One expatriate cited “personal drive and self-imposed pressure to complete tasks.”
- Employer expectations and company culture (44 percent); according to one respondent, “You tend to generate greater respect if you are seen to stay on late and do that bit extra to get results.” And in the words of another, “Being an expatriate, one is almost expected to work 12 hours a day, six to seven days a week.”
- Cultural issues (29 percent). In the experience of one expatriate, “It seems that in the United States, it is considered more normal to work during weekends or vacations than it is in France. “And another said, “Working late and staying in the office until the boss has left seem to be imbedded within Asian culture.”
- Facilitation of conference calls (27 percent). Time-zone differences create problems, too, as a respondent explained, “Headquarters arrives in their office later, and I need to be available when they have questions.”
- Career advancement (19 percent). An expatriate commented, “The company expects that if you want a desirable performance rating, then you must provide the extra effort.”
- Justification of the assignment cost (13 percent). When asked how their work-life balance compares with nonexpatriate colleagues in the host country, 54.5 percent said it was worse. Of these, 47.6 percent cited the higher pressure on expatriates due to the assignment’s cost.

International assignments disrupt family life, causing dissatisfaction among spouses and children with long hours at work and the limited support given to families during periods of separation. Forty-eight percent said that work affected their home life to a greater extent than before they went on assignment. One telling statistic was the frequency that expatriates make a point of having “time out” with the family: 41 percent said occasionally; 23.1 percent, often; and only 5.6 percent, very often.

Travel schedules are also difficult issues. One respondent said, “In the foreign location, it often occurs that wife/husband must remain alone while the partner is away; in a foreign country, this can lead to family stress.” Fifty-four percent cite one business trip a month, 35 percent go on two to four trips and 8 percent travel five to seven times a month. On average, these business trips last 5.6 days.

How Employers Can Help Re-shift the Work-Life Balance

Although individual expatriates must take ownership of their work-life balance, survey respondents did offer suggestions for how employers could help reduce stress:

- Establish and enforce policies and practices at the corporate/group level to ensure that health, wellness, and support systems are extended and enforced at the local level abroad — for example, employee assistance programs (EAPs) for expatriate families in need of emotional counseling or an objective “ear.”
- Make language and cultural-training programs accessible and encourage expatriates to complete them — even if it means finding time after arrival in the host country.
- Maintain contact with expatriates and their families to avoid the “out of sight, out of mind” syndrome. Keep in regular touch through visits, conference calls, newsletters and whatever works best for the company.
- Understand the differing perceptions of expatriates and HR staff regarding work-life balance. Expatriates are likely to become less committed to their employers and less willing to “go the extra mile” unless they believe that reciprocity is forthcoming in return for the extra contribution they bring from their international assignment.

The employer has other options, as well. To address the strain on family members who wish to maintain their jobs or schooling in the home country, many employers now use short-term assignments, which usually last from three months to one year. According to a survey (ORC Worldwide, TheMIGroup and Worldwide ERC 2006), 44.8 percent of the participants experienced an increase in the use of such assignments. And this trend continues. Respondents cited the following countries as the most popular destinations for short-term assignees: Australia, China, India, Korea, Poland and Vietnam.

Commuter assignments, whereby the employee commutes between the home and host location on a regular basis and the family typically remains at home, are also becoming increasingly popular. Nearly half (45.3 percent) experienced an increase in such assignments, which are only successful in certain circumstances. According to the survey (ORC Worldwide, TheMIGroup and Worldwide ERC 2006), the top five reasons for using commuters are:

- Task- or project-oriented assignments (58.4 percent)
- Employee is required to work in both locations (50.2 percent)
- Geographic proximity of home and host locations (41.6 percent)
- Family does not want to relocate (38.7 percent)
- Cost savings (20.8 percent).

Although short-term and commuter assignments offer cost-saving opportunities for the organization, as well as advantages for a working spouse and school-age children, they also hold the potential for higher expenses and administrative difficulties if mismanaged. For example, if the organization loses track of the time spent at the host location, it may face foreign tax liability if the employee's time on site exceeds a certain time period. In both cases (commuter and short-term assignee), tracking the location may be the easy part. The potential for tax liability on employment income in both home and host locations is the bigger

issue. Beyond financial concerns, there is also added stress on the employee due to separation from family, visits in which the spousal roles may be reversed, travel “wear and tear” and others.

THE COST OF BALANCE

International assignments challenge an organization’s ability to expand (and maintain) its presence overseas while finding the most effective resources to achieve that growth and eventual survival. To succeed, the company must ensure that both the host-country operation and expatriates are functioning at optimal capacity. For the operation, it means revenue. For the expatriate, it means satisfied and productive employees not distracted by unhappy families. Expatriates want to avoid the situation expressed by a survey participant: “We are living for work, not working to live.”

To reach this point, the organization needs good judgment in finding the correct balance between spending money and cutting expenses. By estimating the cost of an international assignment ahead of time and reconciling those costs against what the company actually spends, companies can secure more realistic budgets for the years ahead, find cost-saving opportunities and improve global staffing. What also helps is periodically stepping back to take an overall view of the organizational strategy so that issues come into clearer focus. In the end, determining what is best for the company, the employee and the family is a difficult — but not impossible — challenge.

AUTHORS

Sheri Gaster is director, International Compensation Services – Southern Region for ORC Worldwide. She has worked in international HR management for more than 10 years, consulting and managing expatriate programs from the industry side and in an outsourcing environment. At ORC, she focuses on the design and implementation of international policies, program redesign, and technical support

on ORC's international compensation data. Prior to ORC, Gaster was a senior manager in KPMG's International Executive Services practice and director of operations for Windham International. She graduated summa cum laude with a masters in international relations from St. Mary's University and has a B.S. from Texas A&M University. She can be reached at sheri.gaster@orcww.com.

Virginia G. McMorrow, based in New York City, has been the manager of client publications for ORC Worldwide's international compensation practice for the past 11 years. For nine years prior to working with ORC, McMorrow was an editor/writer for various business publications. Previous to that experience, she worked in human resources, specializing in compensation issues. She can be reached at virginia.mcmorrow@orcww.com.

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FIGURE 1: Key Stress Factors for Expatriates (ORC Worldwide 2007)

- Living in hostile, remote, or difficult locations
- Being separated from family and friends
- Acclimating to a new job in a different country
- Dealing with family matters (dual careers, children's education)
- Finding a residence and moving into an unfamiliar location

- Working in a different linguistic and cultural environment
- Facing culture shock while coping with career progression and repatriation fears.

Why Expatriates Feel Greater Stress

Respondents to ORC Worldwide's "2007 Expatriate Work-Life Balance Survey" offered these comments:

- "Expatriation places additional burdens on the individual: cultural stress; dislocation from normal support network and surroundings; administration of moving. Although it has undoubted benefits, you cannot offset one against another."
- "Normal tasks are more difficult to accomplish, and it can be difficult to become accepted and trusted as an outsider. It can be difficult to gain cooperation, and people may take advantage of language differences and the fact you may not have full comprehension of contract laws and labor laws. It can be hard to gain the normal help and support usually available, and the job can be much more stressful."
- "No support from the company at all (just monetary support). Loneliness. Changes in culture, difficulty in getting used to everything (legal system regarding renting, car buying, everything is different, even mailing a letter, the culture is very different, and you do not know anything about it), long hours devoted to issues generated by the process and performing of tasks that are common for a local but very difficult for an expatriate."
- "Frequent pressure or stress related to meet children's needs and balance with work needs while being separated physically. Sometimes a high level of intense feeling of missing the children — manageable but they're in the heart and on the mind. Relief is in knowing we can stay in touch and communicate through all available modern tools/means and will

periodically visit and get together. Hope in the future drives coping. Nothing else!”

- “The stress of learning a new language, culture, job and also making sure my family is adjusting can be overwhelming at times. I underestimated how stressful this would be.”

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