

YOUR RETURN FROM OZ...MAGICAL OR UNMANAGEABLE?

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Dorothy said it all: "There's no place like home."

Coming home is all about the familiar, the comfortable, and the secure. Corporate expatriates, much like Dorothy, go to their own "Oz", a strange, perhaps exotic place with different rules, routines, and language. According to Global Relocation Trends' 2005 survey conducted by GMAC, 81% of companies provide pre-departure cross cultural training for their expatriates and 20% of these companies make it mandatory. So, it is most likely the expat and family were at least minimally primed to modify their expectations, adapt to a different life-style and recognize culture shock during their stay in the new country.

But what is the protocol upon their return? Are expats prepared to experience an adjustment which sometimes lasts twice as long as their adjustment to the new culture? Expats and experts both say no. For many of these global nomads re-entry shock is much more significant than their adjustment to the new culture. They were expecting to be ill at ease in a foreign country, but not at all prepared to feel like a foreigner when they return home. As Robin Pascoe, author of *Homeward Bound* says: "Re-entry shock is when you feel like you are wearing contact lenses in the wrong eyes. Everything looks almost right."

An international experience brings about great professional and personal changes. Old norms and values are viewed from a fresh perspective and the expat and family see things in a new light, something like Dorothy going from black and white to Technicolor. The pace of life in the foreign country might have been slower, allowing for more intimacy in the family. The world opened up and former concerns took on a less significant role. Friends are not familiar with nor are they interested in hearing about the fascinating places and events the expats might have experienced. The employee, who most likely had an autonomous, prestigious position on foreign assignment, now returns as someone who has no defined role and most critically, no place to use his new-found knowledge of the foreign enterprise. There is confusion, doubt and a sense of grief for the loss of the expatriate life.

A substantial investment is made for an expat assignment by both the employee and by the corporation (usually 2-3x the employee's annual salary for just the first year abroad; the total bill for an average overseas stay of three years can top \$1.0 million per expatriate family). Repatriation Orientation Programs are critical for companies who want to improve upon this ROI. Repatriation Orientation Programs, fairly new to the world of corporate training, emphasize the importance of planning for the return of the expat well before the actual arrival. These programs can address the following:

- ✓ Importance of corporate mentors
- ✓ Proper use of home visits
- ✓ Spouse's ability to ease back into a former profession
- ✓ Setting realistic goals for the near and distant future
- ✓ Identifying and integrating newly acquired competencies in both the workplace and the neighborhood.

Repatriation trainers implement these programs a few months before the expat and family begin to pack and set off for home. Preparing the expats for the inevitable change that they will face and assisting them with their new, personal, cultural profile helps them land a little softer when that twister sets them down.

Not only does the expat gain from these programs, but the corporation benefits too. GMAC's survey says that 43% of expats leave the company within 3 years of returning home. Some of the reasons cited involve minimal opportunity to utilize expat experience and poor recognition during and after the assignment. In Repatriation Orientation, with the cooperation of the company, there is time to formulate an action plan which helps enhance the employee's productivity by easing the challenges of this major transition. At the same time, this success then sets an example for upcoming expats which illustrates that a trip over the rainbow is worth the effort and sacrifice.