

What Do Expats Want From HR?

By: Robin Pascoe

This is not a joke: some expats just want to know what the initials HR denote.

Not everyone involved in an expatriate assignment speaks the language of a corporation, so as an international HR specialist, the first question to consider asking of a relocating employee or family (especially on a first time posting) is this: do you know what I do?

Posing that question at the beginning of the relationship between company and expat will not only help sort out some of the basics, it's an excellent starting point for HR people to explain what they can or cannot do for an employee and/or a family during a relocation.

At the same time, an expat employee or family member (if they are invited into the discussions) can provide HR with an overview of his or her own expectations during the assignment.

What are those expectations?

Generally speaking, expats want everything and usually want it done by yesterday.

Employees want to know that their career will keep on ticking while away on assignment and that they won't vanish into the corporate abyss upon repatriation.

Accompanying spouses want to know all the logistics of the move and if the possibility of working while overseas will be viable. The children, meanwhile, usually just want to know why their parents are ruining their lives by moving.

From HR's standpoint, the support required for an expat varies depending on their adaptability and needs, according to Johanna Glennie, international assignments manager for UK food retailer Tesco. But she outlines some key areas.

"The key support areas for an expat are typically managing the whole process of expatriation and repatriation, being a consistent contact and source of information for them in their home country, and keeping them on people's agendas."

Glennie believes the most fundamental area of support comes in the final six months of expats' assignments, when they are working on finding their next role.

"This is where the role of HR support as a facilitator of the repatriation process is most critical," she says.

"We help ensure they return to a role which recognises their abilities and skills, and most important of all, encapsures their personal and business growth while on assignment."

Whether the expectations on either side are realistic or not, HR is usually left trying to satisfy everyone, often with limited resources allotted by the company.

But talk is cheap - fortunately, as communication is critical between HR and the expat in order to meet any or all expectations.

Don't forget the family

If there is an accompanying family, most expat spouses believe that communication between the company and family should come directly through them.

That's because many employees are still reluctant to approach the company with problems because they are worried it might affect their career.

Further, there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that the working partner doesn't always give the 'full story' to the spouse in order to avoid heated discussions at home.

This makes the notion of direct communication with spouses even more important.

Most expat spouses have few problems voicing the family's needs. In fact, they feel it is the needs of the family which HR systematically ignore.

"My personal feeling is that HR departments are badly distanced from the people they should care about the most," says UK expat and writer, Amanda Carter.

"It's not employees who make postings go bad; it's their families. How can HR personnel expect to improve things if they don't ask families how they feel about everything?"

"This is what spouses and families want: to be considered, consulted and listened to. In most postings, HR managers never even bother to meet the spouses let alone ask them if they actually want to go on assignments."

For many expat spouses, a demonstration of how much they are appreciated by the company could definitely originate with the corporate chequebook.

"Being an expat used to be lucrative," says Amanda Carter. "These days, it isn't. Spouses need more help with travel costs for visiting family like elderly parents or children in boarding schools, assistance with phone bills, and an awareness on the part of HR that spouses are losing income by virtue of accompanying partners abroad."

Finally, what expats want most of all is to know that the company which has uprooted them and transplanted them into a foreign country cares.

While it's often difficult for HR to find program money for training, communicating on a regular basis is now an easily clicked 'send button' away.

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