

Repatriation management: An Overview

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Abstract

Employee retention becomes a major aspect to be concentrated by a company to retain skilled workforce or say high net worth individuals. A company goes through various ways to retain their skilled workforce. Though, international companies that regularly send employees on global assignments are squandering millions of dollars a year. This is one of the villains of workforce attrition. Importantly, there is a need to focus on repatriation management.

Repatriation generally refers to the termination of the overseas assignment and coming back to the home country or to the country where the Headquarter is located or to the home subsidiary from where he/she was expatriated. The purpose of this article is to highlight the relevance of repatriation management in retaining Human Resources (HR). General happenings take place on repatriation are discussed with attempt of some coping strategies. Management of repatriation requires action in four steps: before-expatriation, during expatriation, on repatriation and retention. This article covers the repatriation management process with fourfold structure of repatriation event.

Keywords:

Repatriation, Expatriate, Management, Acculturation, Process

Introduction

Employee retention is the ability of an organization to retain its employees. It can be represented by a simple statistic (for example, a retention rate of 70% usually indicates that an organization kept 70% of its employees in a given period). Hence retention becomes the strategy rather than the outcome. Here, two terms are focused, viz., expatriates and repatriates. Expatriate is a person temporarily or permanently residing in a country and culture other than that of the person's upbringing. The word comes from the Latin terms *ex* ("out of") and *patria* ("country, fatherland"). On the other hand repatriate is a person who has returned to the country of origin.

Repatriation (from Late Latin *repatriare*) is the process of returning a person back to one's place of origin or citizenship. This includes the process of returning refugees or soldiers to their place of origin following a war. The term may also refer to the process of converting a foreign currency into the currency of one's own country. The forced return of a person to a country where he faces persecution is more specifically known as *refoulement*. A repatriate plays a key role to connect corporate boundary to rest of the globe. The successful completion of assignment makes it sure for corporate growth prospects.

The dilemma here if one migrated or sent for an assignment and

psychologically feels fit with host country and remote culture. Why he/ she return?

There are reasons for repatriation as well.

The most common reason is that the period of posting got over. Second, the expat need to move on to another global assignment of a similar kind where he/she would have the opportunity to use the skills and expertise acquired. Third, the expats return because of failure to do the assigned job and demoralized to move on further project. Forth, the assignees are not happy in their overseas assignment. Fifth is family's unwillingness to stay. Last not the least, inability to adjust to host country environment.

Many agencies or human capital solution firms are adhered for employee retention particularly on repatriation part. Though these provide training for expatriates for better performance and work execution. On the flip side the parent company wants human capital to be with them for career span of that repatriate.

Both employers and employees need to be actively involved in repatriation before, during and after the assignment. According to Helen Bannigan, COO of Bond PR International, "Repatriation is much more difficult than expatriation, much to the surprise of many who experience both. This fact makes the experience challenging from the start, since the expectation is that the transition will be easy, and it rarely is." Bannigan is an American expat who went through repatriation and currently resides in Italy.

A research indicates that successful expatriation assignments rely on four elements: the selection of the candidates, pre-arrival preparation for both expatriate and family, the provided support and possibility to keep in touch with the home organization while on an expatriate assignment, and the repatriation arrangements after completion of the assignment (Baruch and Altman, 2002). According to the 2005 Global Relocation Trends Survey, issued by GMAC Global Relocation Services and the National Foreign Trade Council, 23% of repatriating employees leave their company in the first year. After three years the total is at least 40%, though some people place it closer to 50%. According to the "2008 Global Relocation Trends Survey" from GMAC Global Relocation Services, 27 percent of expatriate employees leave their companies within one year of their return. This is double the annual turnover rate for all employees. Now, consider 25 percent leave between their second and third year, and 23 percent after the third year. In the 2012 Global Relocation Trends Survey report, companies reporting growth in international assignee populations jumped nearly 50 percent from 2011 and well beyond what has been reported in Brookfield Global Relocation Services' last three annual trends reports. This year's results indicate a return to activity levels not seen since 2007 suggesting that, regardless of regional economic woes, multinational corporations are mobilizing workers to fill skills gaps and develop talent, especially in emerging and developing markets.

UK repatriate study conducted with survey of 124 repatriated employees. Data analysis indicated analysis indicated five predictors for repatriate maladjustment (in ranked order):

1. Length of time abroad
2. Unrealistic expectations
3. Downward job mobility

4. Reduced work status

5. Negative perceptions of employer's support

Since repatriate desertions come under the human resource retention umbrella, it properly falls to human resources to tackle the gap between understanding and corrective action. This will not go wrong to say- "The failure on repatriation management is the gap between understanding and implementation of psychology on repatriation management." A corporate mounts successful efforts to stem the flow of deserting personnel. Keen assessment should be taken and the cause of failure could be identified. Ample number of factors such as epiphany (perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realization), reverse cultural shock, emptiness, uncomfoting, dissatisfaction, incuriousness from most people, standard of living and the like soft parts drag them back from natives.

'What to do'

Michael Harvey's study (1989), 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 (The feeling of being alienated from other people). Hence, companies need to close the gap between expectation and reality.

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.

Repatriation Management Process

"Repatriation management worth not only when employee returns but also considerable when expatriation phase starts." Andreason and Kinneer rightly said; "The time to begin planning for reentry is even before sending employees on foreign assignment." This sentiment is echoed by Lisa Johnson, Director of consulting services for Cartus: "Set post assignment expectations before the assignment begins."

The main objective of repatriation management process is to retain talent. The process goes through some phases which internally combine organizational factors, individual factors, social factors that affect re-entry and work adjustment. Multinational responses responses to repatriate concerns and design repatriation programme. There is the **fourfold** structure of repatriation event is suggested-

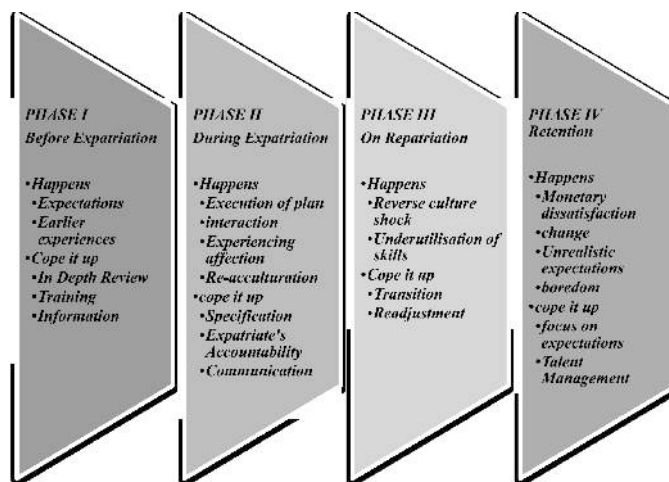


Figure 1- Phases of repatriation management
Phase I – Before Expatriation

Happens

1. Expectations
2. Earlier experiences

Lot many queries arise and several expectations regarding benefits after successful completion of assignment whether are or not. But the dilemma exists whether suit for future career span. "Expectations and expatriation correlated". Earlier experiences gained, helps an expatriate to further knowing, performing and upgrading himself. "Newer one always either excites or makes us nervous."

Cope it up

1. In depth Review
2. Information
3. Mentoring

Employee's goals and responsibilities defined while globally deployed. Employee performance and progress are monitored. It is important for the future repatriate to maintain ties with home country management. This helps ensure integration of the employee's pre-expat, expat and repat career objectives. Expatriates must understand that these sessions as mandatory which make easy interaction to host country's environment. In Parallel, home country mentors him so not to get away from home country. Maintaining informal relationship is quite critical. Here mentoring plays a vital role.

Phase II – During Expatriation

The phases which exist while an expatriate on global assignment. Lot of disparities occurs. One of the major factor is 'Physical Relocation' which involves removal of personal belongings, breaking ties with colleagues and friends and traveling to the next posting, usually the home country.

Happens

1. Execution of plan

The expatriate performs for what purpose he has sent to the host

country. The plan / assignment congruous for execution meet the purpose. Change initiates.

2. Interactions

"More we interact and involve, higher the rate of completion." A newer one with strong compliance sometime excludes an old worth one.

3. Experiencing affection

More of the factors like cultural influence, identity, work phenomenon changes. The degree of integration increases with longer time span.

4. Expatriate Re-acculturation

Acculturation is the process of adopting the cultural traits or social patterns of another group. Once the high worth individual, of course a human being by nature, they come with the habit to survive with the culture so called like. A corporate fails to manage the situation. They come under dilemma 'what to do'. Many ways are suggested by global agencies for retaining workforce. "As the individual acculturate himself, the cultural and psychological change occurs. The more ardent he become with the distant culture, the reluctant he be with his own one." So the re-acculturation phase diverts their overall adoption from the culture they recently approved to be with.

Cope it up

1. Specification

Clear and specified task make it unambiguous to expatriate in performing.

2. Expatriate's accountability

There should be open discussion from job opportunities to changed job market. The more accountability between expatriate and home office the more likely it is that the repatriate will secure a position that leverages his global learning gained in the host country.

3. Communication

The key to healthy repatriation is frequent and open communication, with a vigilant eye kept on the relationship between expectation and reality. The more communication between the expatriate and the home office, the easier reentry is likely to be. Mentor and mentee can communicate informally through various channels and ways like, emails, phone calls, conferencing. These ways are opportunities for the expatriate to speak honestly about any professional or personal issues and for him to hear about home office changes and developments, especially when they may affect him.

Phase III – On Repatriation

Happens

1. Reverse culture shock

Reverse Culture Shock, or "re-entry", is associated with the phenomenon of returning to one's own country and culture. Very similar to culture shock, a person entering into their home environment will have to make adjustments to reacquaint themselves with their surroundings. Unlike culture shock, most do not anticipate feeling like a foreigner in their own home. However, it should be expected by repatriate and company as well. If they have made any cultural adjustments while abroad, it surely arise and hence will have to readjust once back home.

2. Underutilisation of skills

One of the most common complaints by repatriates is that the competency (Knowledge, Skills, Attitude, talent and expertise) they gained while on global assignment is not put to use upon return. Repatriates feel valued in host country.

Cope it up

1. Transition

Some companies hire relocation consultants to assist in this phase also. Typical activities include acquiring temporary accommodation, making arrangements for housing and schooling, performing necessary administrative tasks (e.g. renewing driver's license, applying for medical insurance, opening bank accounts)

2. Readjustment

Even if the employee's first job does not draw on global learning, company officials can provide repatriates with opportunities by sponsoring seminars, Q&A sessions and other informal events. Professional re-entry training should be given to expat and his or her family that covers social cultural contrast orientation, an updated political and social issues and changes in the home country, job opportunities for the partner, an evaluation of the experiences in the host culture and the psychological aspects of repatriation. This will go a long way toward helping repats.

Phase IV – Retention

Generally accepted practices throughout, helps in retaining talent pool. These are Employee Reward Program, Career development programme, performance based bonus, recreational facilities, open communication etc. when the matter is to retain repatriate some more specific and focused points strategies of psychological contract is to be developed.

It is commonly accepted that approximately 20% of repatriates change organisations within a year of returning, with a further 20% moving on within a second year. While the average global mobility professional is acutely aware of these trends and the potential impact of this turnover, in many organisations their managerial colleagues seem less engaged with this issue. A research by David Collings suggests that one key reason for this trend is the frustration international assignees feel when they return home and are not given the opportunity to apply the expertise they have gained while abroad. Equally perplexing to them is the fact that the career benefits which they expected to accrue from the international assignment do not materialise.

Happens

1. Monetary dissatisfaction

Every organization has a salary budget for every employee which can be raised to some extent but not beyond a certain limit. Retention becomes a problem when a repatriate quotes an exceptionally high figure beyond the budget of the organization and is just not willing to compromise.

2. Stop people to change is a big challenge

Every organization tries its level best to hire and retain employees from the competitors and thus provide lucrative opportunities to attract and retain them. Once repatriate become greedy for money and position and thus look forward to changing the present job and join the competitors. No or a little amount of counseling helps in such cases.

3. Unrealistic expectations

There is actually no solution to unrealistic expectations. An individual must be mature enough to understand that one can't get all the comforts at the workplace just like his home. An individual must not look for a change due to small issues. One needs time to make his presence feel at the organization and must try his level best to stick to it for a good amount of time and ignore petty issues as they had a huge opportunity investment on their expatriation.

4. Tendency to get bored in a short span of time

The management finds it difficult to convince the employees in such cases. Repat must also understand that every organization has some or the other problem and adjustment is required everywhere, so why not in the present organization? It becomes really difficult for the HR Department to find out what exactly is going on in the minds of repats.

Research suggests that recruiting managers will often imply that taking the assignment will have positive career benefits for the assignee. This creates very unrealistic expectations for assignees and can lead to frustration when, on completion of the assignment, the career progression does not materialise. When this frustration is combined with the fact that the international experience is often viewed attractively by the external labour market, turnover becomes an increased risk. The assignee seeks other opportunities in organisations which place a premium on their international experience and offer the career advancement not offered by their current employer.

Cope it up

Every company which face the problem regarding repatriation

retention, could attempt for training to repatriates through certain ways-

1. Complete focus on repatriate profile and expectations

If companies want to stem the loss of human resources they needed to close the chasm between expectation and reality experienced by most returning employees. In the 14 years since the Black-Gregersen study, others have conducted more sophisticated and comprehensive studies of both corporations and individual repatriates. Their findings have elaborated on the 1992 study and these elaborations have prompted considerable speculation about the problem and its solution

2. Making use of experience and skills garnered abroad (Talent Management)

Employees who are sent on global assignment primarily for developmental reasons are considered high potential. This cohort represents a critical pool of talent within the organisation. Yet, recent research has confirmed that those sent on assignments for developmental purposes are more likely to leave the organisation on repatriation than others. They are more marketable in the external labour market. There is strategic integration between global mobility and global talent management is needed. In view of this, Cisco's talent management works with new assignees from the beginning. Furthermore, the organisation places great responsibility on the hiring manager to think about the assignee's career development in the context of the international assignment. Re-assessing repatriate's career path gives a closure look to remain him. Research evidence suggests that many repatriates report frustration at the lack of career progression on completing an assignment.

Conclusion

Repatriation refers to the homecoming of an expatriate after completing his or her assignment in a host country. There is the problem in both the parties in repatriation. The problems of repats arise due to dissatisfaction and the like factors between individual and organisation. Repatriation management is the key to retain talent pool in the home country where competencies of high net worth personnel is used in standardized form.

While talent retention is a priority for any company, it is a critical mandate for corporate that send expatriates abroad to oversee global interests. The risk of losing returning talent as a result of either personal or professional dissatisfaction can be mitigated with a formal repatriation program that gives returning expatriates a warm and inviting welcome home. The complete process on repatriation must be followed and well strategic training program should be organised. Repatriation process involves four phases viz., before expatriation, during expatriation, repatriation and retention. All these go with challenges to cope up with successful implementation of strategies.

Recommendation

Repatriation management requires action in all the four phases. An

informal debriefing on the expatriate experience, open conversation, training on reverse culture, informal conversation with employees in organizational hierarchy must be taken care. Pleasant surprises to repats helps in retaining. The talent management should be focused as to reduce the turnover. Not only in adopting strategies but actual implementation is need from the very start of expatriation planning phase.

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