

Family tops list of expat concerns

Although more companies are handling overseas assignments better, much remains to be done to support expatriated employees.

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With grim prospects at home due to the economic crisis, many executives are volunteering to accept overseas assignments.

However, gone are the days of the cushy relocation package, making such assignments less enticing than they used to be.

Another downside is that executives feel less inclined to decline an expat assignment, fearing reprisals should they say no.

These are some of the [conclusions of a study](#) by IESE and Ernst & Young, based on interviews and surveys of executives from 30 multinational companies, most of them Spanish.

Consequences of the crisis

Turning down an overseas assignment carries the distinct possibility of either losing your job or seriously limiting your career prospects, according to those surveyed.

The fact that there is a line of other executives waiting to take your place adds to their worries.

The effects of the crisis are also felt in expat packages. Seven years ago, the major financial incentives being offered to expats were enough to lure candidates abroad.

Now, however, an expat assignment is no longer the road to riches. There is hardly much

difference from what they would earn at home, unless the job abroad represents a genuine promotion.

Having said that, extra pay is still being offered to reflect a higher cost of living in the destination country, or hazards associated with a particular assignment.

Family matters

In choosing candidates, companies tend to look for someone assertive, with solid professional skills, flexibility and high performance.

Interestingly, personal and family circumstances are of secondary importance in the selection process — yet this turns out to be a deciding factor, both when it comes to the candidate accepting or rejecting the offer, and also the subsequent success of the move.

In fact, 96 percent of those who reject an offer to go abroad do so for family reasons, but not for the usual reason of not wanting to uproot the family, but increasingly because of professional conflicts with their working spouse.

As the study notes, there appears to be a disconnect between the scant attention that companies pay to the personal/family factor and the importance that executives attach to the same issue.

Unless companies are able to accommodate today's dual-career realities, the decision to bypass an overseas assignment may limit business opportunities for all parties involved.

Some companies are starting to appreciate this, with nearly twice as many companies as six years ago paying for a trip for the spouse to go and get to know the country before moving there.

Monitoring the assignment

A 2005 version of the same study found that many executives worried that an assignment abroad would feel like banishment to the outer regions.

However, that fear has nearly halved, as advancements in ICT have helped to close the distance between headquarters and outposts in foreign markets.

While most say they try to follow up on employees working in other countries in some way, only 10 percent have formal procedures in place, and only half say that communication with

expat employees is frequent and fluid.

Those interviewed pointed to the lack of indicators to measure strategic goals for expats. Such indicators might include evaluations of knowledge sharing and spreading the corporate culture.

If "success" is measured purely by the length of time spent abroad, 95 percent remained for the entire assignment, with 48 percent opting to extend it.

For many, the return home is the hardest part, due to conflicting expectations. Expats want more guarantees about the job waiting for them back home, while companies are not always in the position to offer specifics.

Although 76 percent of companies define the position six months before the expat returns home, 14 percent do so just before they return and 10 percent do so after they are back.

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