

# Tapping into the value of long-term expats

**Fewer employees are returning from assignments abroad — a pool of talent that companies often fail to appreciate and retain. Here's how.**



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By [Sebastian Reiche](#)

For much of the past half-century, international assignments followed a familiar script:

employees were sent abroad for a few years, gained valuable experience and eventually returned home to advance their careers. But today, a growing number of professionals don't come back at all. Instead, they remain abroad for extended periods, relocate to new countries or change careers. Some marry, raise families and build an entire life far from home.

These professionals, who my colleagues and I refer to as “long-term expatriates,” are becoming an increasingly visible part of the workforce. Yet many organizations still struggle to recognize their value or understand their career trajectories.

In our research paper [published in \*Human Resource Management Review\*](#), my colleagues Stefan Jooss, Margaret Shaffer, Jan Selmer and I examine both the benefits and the setbacks of long-term expatriation. We find that long-term expats provide important cross-border knowledge, exceptional adaptability and leadership skills that are difficult to find in domestic settings. But companies frequently underinvest in retaining this group, and at the same time, individuals themselves can lose direction after many years abroad.

In a world where business operations are increasingly international, aligning the interests of organizations and long-term expatriates should be seen as a key strategic move.

## A new kind of expatriate

The classic expat model assumes that international work is temporary, but research shows that the longer an individual stays abroad, the less likely they are to return home. After a decade overseas, for example, repatriation becomes an exception, rather than the rule. Many expats integrate into local communities, transition into permanent roles in host countries or pursue opportunities elsewhere in the world.

And these choices are rarely driven by one single factor. While career aspirations play a role, so do personal relationships, lifestyle preferences, family needs and unexpected life events. These aspects of employees' lives, however, are often ignored by companies and their mobility policies.

One of the key contributions of our research is the identification of four distinct long-term expatriate profiles, each reflecting a different way that global careers can take shape.

- **Planted pioneers** relocate abroad independently and remain there for the long haul. They often embed themselves deeply in the host country, pursuing careers

that are more local than international. Their professional identities resemble those of skilled migrants, even if their initial move was career-driven.

- **Stationed settlers** begin as company-assigned expatriates but decide to stay once their formal assignment ends. Strong personal ties — such as a partner, children or a sense of belonging — frequently influence this decision. Over time, they may move on to local contracts or explore new opportunities in another country.
- **Free floaters** embrace mobility itself. They choose to move repeatedly between countries, crafting careers that span multiple locations. Often highly independent, they prioritize flexibility and autonomy over organizational stability.
- **Jetstream leaders** tend to be senior leaders whose careers unfold through consecutive international postings. These executives move from one subsidiary to another, continually providing leadership across different regions.

## Expatriation as a double-edged sword

Long-term expatriates provide skills that are vital to global companies. Their exposure to different markets gives them a multicultural understanding that's impossible to obtain back home. Their professional networks are far and wide. They're better equipped to navigate ambiguity, manage across time zones and lead diverse teams.

Yet extended time abroad also brings about challenges. Career trajectories can veer off course when there aren't clear paths available; many employees report feeling invisible to their company headquarters, excluded from leadership pipelines and strategic conversations. What's more, legal and immigration issues may arise, as well as family needs (like a partner who can't find a job or a child who can't adapt).

But long-term expatriation doesn't happen by accident — it's often a mix of deliberate decisions *and* unplanned events. Whether or not this ends up benefiting or hurting the employee, however, depends on how intentional they are about such decisions. Our work suggests that expats best able to cultivate sustainable global careers are often those who reflect regularly on their goals, seek guidance and maintain an open dialogue with their higher-ups back home. Expats who struggle with direction, on the other hand, are those who allow external circumstances to dictate their every move.

For organizations, viewing long-term expats as strategic assets instead of logistical challenges promises better retention rates. This means maintaining regular contact, supporting family integration and ensuring employees remain visible in talent reviews. Most

important, it is about shifting mindsets: moving beyond the assumption that international work is temporary and acknowledging that global careers can evolve over years.

Ignoring the existence, or the needs, of long-term expats is no longer an option. They have become an increasingly common part of the corporate world, and companies that embrace this reality will be better positioned to harness the value of this global talent. At the same time, individuals who approach international mobility with purpose, rather than inertia, are more likely to build job trajectories that endure.

Global careers today rarely follow a straight line. And for a growing number of professionals, they no longer lead back home at all.

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