

# **HOW COACHING CAN HELP CREATE**

## **SUCCESSFUL EXPATRIATE ASSIGNMENTS**



As I embark in the prospect of yet another expatriate assignment I can't help but notice the effect that this decision is placing on those around me. I have lived and worked outside my birth country since I was a teenager, and so the idea to move to a new country, a new culture, a new adventure makes me feel excited and honoured to be able to experience such a unique way of life.

And yet when I look around my loved ones and other fellow expatriates, I see the weight they carry for me about the impending change of my life circumstances. Relocation to them signifies change, lack of routine, fear of the unknown, having to start again, being home-sick, lack of family support, having to create a new social network... why is this all sounding so negative? And how come I don't see it the same way, when I have relocated so many times before?

In my experience, a new environment and change can be a very positive and rewarding experience, if you are willing to embrace the new changes and are proactive in tackling potential barriers from the start. But how can this happen? What can we do to ensure the success of any expatriate assignment? What's the benefit for companies sending assignees to international locations to ensure success rates are high? Are there any costs involved? What could be the best approach to increase overall success rates?

A myriad of expatriate services are fast becoming a need for international assignments. From cultural orientation training, consulting services, counselling, relocation services, coaching, etc. These are just some of the most commonly used services assisting and supporting expatriates and their families who are making their move abroad.

Maximising the chances of an employee's success in a foreign location is a critical business priority. If a manager or executive is sent abroad and fails to either settle into the new culture or work effectively with his/her new colleagues, the whole venture will be a waste of valuable time, effort and money.

An extensive global study by the American Management Association found that providing coaching to expatriates is associated with coaching success and improved market performance. (Mary Key, Institute of Corporate Productivity "What Really Works When It Comes to Coaching", June 2008).

Coaching, specifically for couples and their families, is increasingly being recognized as a potentially vital service for the success of expatriate assignments. Yet, this service, that could address the very heart of an expatriate families' adjustment, is often found missing in many programs of expatriate services. Given the scope of the investment and the fact that the success of an expatriate assignment seems to be so heavily dependent on the expatriate's spousal or family relationships, coaching for expatriates and their families should be made available in every international program of expatriate services and during every phase in the life cycle of an expatriate assignment (Miser & Miser, 2009).

So how could coaching enhance the prospect of an expatriate assignment? Furthermore, what determines the successful outcome of an expatriate assignment, and how can coaching increase the expatriate assignments success rate?

Expatriate families relocating across the globe will inevitably go through a degree of change with mixed results. How can coaching help those families adapt and easily transition to their new global circumstances?

Today's business environment requires organizations to compete on a global scale. Because of better opportunities overseas, many firms are expanding abroad. In fact, some estimates show that companies have doubled the number of international assignees in recent years, despite the recent economic downturn. From a company's perspective, international assignments can provide employees valuable lessons in international management and multi-cultural organizations.

While moving abroad suggests images of adventure and intrigue, for many expatriates and their families, the process can be very stressful. According to the ORC Worldwide 2007 Expatriate Work-Life Balance Survey, more than half (55%) of today's international assignees are weighed down by added stress caused by longer hours, extended work days/weeks and cultural differences, among other factors. And two-thirds (65%) feel the strain of managing the demands of work and the well-being of the family.

Longer working hours, late night phone calls from headquarters many time zones off, long business trips, and an unhappy spouse at home who has abandoned her/his career to support the manager. These are just a few of the challenges now merging with the already well-known expatriate adjustment factors of culture shock, a new overseas office, and extensive regional travel to wreak havoc with the work-life balance of the modern day global manager working in a 24/7 economy.

The ORC Worldwide Survey 2007 found that expatriates identified the following top five stressors of moving and working abroad:

- Challenging new job (62.8%)
- Inability to take part in activities available at home (44.6%)
- Loss of support network (42.8%)
- Language and other cultural difficulties (40.7%)
- Spouse unable to find work (37.9%)

It is undeniable that expatriate programs are inherently risky mainly because an organization is uprooting an employee from a "comfortable" position within a familiar culture and re-planting them into a new unfamiliar culture. But, with proper planning and selecting, some of those inherent risks can be mitigated.

To properly plan for the international assignment, an organization needs to consider all aspects of the assignment and prepare the assignee and their family for the relocation and immersion into a new culture and assignment. Selecting the right person for an international assignment is just the first step for an organization. In addition to the selection process, an organization must properly plan for the relocation, reassignment and support of the employee and the employee's family. Since the role the family plays in the relocation does contribute significantly to the overall success of the assignment, it is important to support the expatriate families in both professional and personal areas.

Studies of expatriate relocations have highlighted how "culture shock", i.e. being impacted by cross cultural differences, can negatively impact upon a relocation assignment, and so organizations have now realised the importance of intercultural understanding and its potential impact upon

relocations. Cultural training aids the employee and family to better approach and deal with the relocation, ensuring that the negative consequences of “culture shock” are greatly reduced. However, this proactive step alone will not ensure the success of the assignment, as expatriate families won’t really know how life in their new country will be until they actually move abroad. Therefore, support *during* the expatriate assignment becomes an even more critical factor in ensuring the family adjusts and enhances their new way of life in the best possible way. And this is where coaching can provide this kind of support and assistance.

## THE REAL COSTS OF EXPATRIATE ASSIGNMENTS

According to recent surveys, about 20% of all expatriate assignments fail, which means that the expat returned home prematurely – either for personal reasons or because he or she is recalled by the head office – and the stated business objectives for the assignment were not met. The typical length of time a repatriate stays with his or her former employer is only nine months. These figures represent a significant loss of ROI on both financial and personal levels.

Costs for international assignments have been steadily climbing with typical costs for a long-term assignment approaching \$1 million (Runnion, 2005, p. 21). Considering that the average mid-sized business relocates an average of 34 people every year (Runnion, p.21), costs for international assignments can quickly add up.

When an expatriate assignment fails, the costs, both direct and indirect, can also be substantial, ranging from \$200,000 to \$1.2 million or more (Swaak, 1995; McNulty, 2001).

The implications of assignment failure are, at a minimum:

- Huge costs in terms of salary, recruitment, training and relocation
- Failure of intended business objective and potential damage to client relationships
- “Costs” to the employee in terms of loss of self esteem, career derailment and relationship / family issues.

## WHAT IS COACHING?



The International Coach Federation (ICF) defines coaching as a partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. (ICF website, 2013).

Coaching is the practice of supporting an individual through the process of achieving a specific professional or personal result. In my own personal experience, any expatriate assignment will be much more likely to succeed if the assignee, and partner if there is one, is given two things; training in the cultural values of the new country and assistance with making their new country their new *home*. Without this support, no expat assignment will fulfil its potential and is much more likely to terminate early.

Through coaching, the expatriate will receive support in areas such as business culture, etiquette, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, staff management and other key areas that will help them communicate and work effectively with their new team. A family or spouse will receive guidance of cultural issues relating to their new environment such as schooling, lifestyle, local culture, etc. This aims at familiarising the family with their new destination.

Some of the benefits of facilitating coaching for the expatriate family are:

- Mentally preparing the individual or family for the move.
- Exploring and learning some of the “unknown” factors that may build doubt and fear prior to the relocation.
- Providing cross cultural learning opportunities and understanding of cultural differences.
- Providing the opportunity to ask any questions, or address any anxieties in a non judgemental and supportive environment.
- Motivating and encouraging the family to explore any potential opportunities that may arise as a result of the move.
- Reducing stress and creating coping strategies to better handle adversity.
- Making the transition and settling-in process an easier and smoother one.
- Establishing the creation of new goals in line with their own values within their new environmental and cultural circumstances.
- Creating an understanding about expectations surrounding change, adaptation and integration issues in their new location.
- Minimising “culture shock”.
- Overall reducing the chances of relocation failure.

## **WHY COACHING?**

Expatriate assignees and their families can greatly benefit from coaching services conducted by a professionally trained certified coach who has experience working with expatriates, their spouses and their families. In most cases, the coach is also someone with cross-cultural expertise and international experience who can understand the real life issues and challenges that the expatriate assignees and their families are experiencing.

Coaching provides expatriates with a rich opportunity to explore their values and what is important to them, what they are passionate about, what they are concerned about, and what kind of a life they envision together in their new host country. Through a conversation with a professional coach, expatriates are able to enhance the quality of their lives, achieve their personal and career goals and be supported in living passionate, balanced and fulfilling lives, despite new environmental or cultural circumstances.

A comprehensive coaching plan would be one that addresses all aspects regarding the international assignment in these three segments:

1. Prior
2. During
3. Post

Let's look at how coaching can help throughout the entire expatriate assignment cycle:

### **STAGE 1: PRIOR TO INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENT**

At this initial stage, one of the most crucial decisions would be to assess the readiness of the potential assignee and his/her family. Assigning the right candidate to the expatriate assignment can be critical to a company's return on investment. A coach can assist the potential expatriate assignee understand the role and scope of the international assignment and consider the individual's personal motivation for taking the assignment. A coach can also help to clarify all initial queries and concerns that may come up at the time.

The most important choice at this stage is to decide whether to pursue the international assignment or not, and a coach can help with the assignee and his/her family to confidently come to terms with their choice to either pursue or deny the opportunity.

In this phase it is also instrumental to create an understanding by all family members on how they intend to live their life in their new host country, and how they would go about creating a life for themselves, aligned with what they feel is important and what they value most. Considering all "pros" and "cons" will also ensure that the family is better equipped to deal with any logistical, financial and emotional aspects of the assignment as they arise.

At this point, and in preparation for their relocation, the family may participate in a cross-cultural orientation to help the whole family understand the cultural differences between their home country and their host country, understanding life in the host country, managing the challenges of moving and adjusting to life to a new country and assessing individual and family needs prior to the move.

### **STAGE 2: DURING THE INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENT**

Having a professional coach available to an expatriate, their spouse and family during the life cycle of the assignment can magnify the chances of success in their personal and professional lives. Once the expatriate assignee and their family is on the ground in the new country, a coach can be available to them for problem-solving, adjusting to the cultural norms of their new country, and taking a longer view as they settle into their new life.

A coach can also assist the family in working as a team during this time of significant change. Accepting an expatriate assignment requires fact-finding, brainstorming, planning, communicating with other family members and making important choices and decisions.

A coach can also assist them in reflecting on and exploring the new culture. During the initial period of adjustment to the new country, families tend to feel stressed and overwhelmed by the lack of routine and support in general. A professional coach can assist expatriates in exploring and enjoying the cultural gifts of their new country, while avoiding the tendency to adopt negative or disempowering viewpoints about their host and/or home country's challenges as they naturally compare life in both countries.

A key role in coaching for expatriates will also be facilitating problem solving. A couple can get support in adjusting their roles and responsibilities, keeping focused on short-term goals, identifying

roadblocks and obstacles, and working together to solve problems. Couples can learn ways to notice disempowering viewpoints and create empowering perspectives as they learn to integrate into their new life circumstances.

In adjusting to the new culture, within the first year of the assignment, it is often a period of maximum cultural shock for an expatriate, their spouse and their children (Copeland, 2009). Expatriates begin to have increased difficulty in coping with the daily stresses of adjusting to life in their new country and experience a range of symptoms, ranging from homesickness, boredom and irritability to disruptions in sleep patterns and increased feelings of sadness and anxiety.

A coach can be instrumental at this stage in helping the expatriate family deal with culture shock. In addition, a coach can help develop strategies to reduce stress and gain some perspective during this most difficult time of adjustment. A trained certified coach can also spot situations in which a couple or other family members may be experiencing more intense problems that are outside the professional capabilities of the coach, and can assist the expatriate in seeking therapeutic help within the local community.

A coach can also help the expatriate family staying connected with friends and family back home to maintain a sense of balance and connection in this time of emotional turbulence, but also helping them connect with local resources and the expatriate community in their new location. Expanding their connection with the wider expatriate community through participating in expatriate clubs and other resources can be key for expatriates as they adjust to life in a new country.

With the assistance of a coach, a couple will be better able to plan for and assess local opportunities, create projects, make plans and take committed action. Travelling, going on sightseeing excursions, volunteering, building a new social network, finding a job, or building a business are all projects that require planning, problem solving and taking action.

### **STAGE 3: POST INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENT (REPATRIATION)**

People who have spent a significant length of time living or working in a foreign country sometimes find that the readjustment to their home culture upon their return is even more difficult than the initial adjustment to the foreign culture. Part of the reason for this may be that this “re-entry shock” is unanticipated – why should one have difficulty adjusting to one’s own culture?

In completing the expatriation and getting ready to coming home, a coach can be used to integrate their expatriate experience and to facilitate their transition home. Creating alignment around a new vision for the future can assist a couple in understanding all the challenges they will face as they prepare for their move home or to another expatriate assignment.

A coach can work with the couple in creating a project that involves not only handling the logistics of the repatriation, but also resolving the transition issues for each member of the family.

When their assignment draws to a close, a coach can also be available to the assignee and their family to facilitate a family debriefing, which is designed to help the whole family in coming to terms with the benefits and the drawbacks of their expatriate experience. Fully acknowledging the lessons learned, the international friendships gained, and the memories captured can facilitate a smoother transition for the couple and their family. This will allow all family members understand their own growth and emotional, social and cultural development during the assignment.



In summary, coaching enables expatriates and their families address integration issues and better understand the impact of relocating to a new country on both their personal and professional lives.

In allowing coaching services to be accessible to expatriates and their families, they are able to gain an understanding of how their approach to work and life in their new country will translate into a new cultural environment and what kinds of adjustments will bridge the cultural gaps to ensure successful working and personal relationships.

In ensuring the success of expatriate assignments, coaching could therefore be considered to be a critical component of that success, which would significantly decrease expatriate failure rates. Well-planned selection, preparation, support and reintegration programs, which can all be conducted by a professional coach, can help to increase expatriates' overall assignment effectiveness.

In relocating an employee to a different country, a company will spend far more on taxes, housing, and relocation costs than on any cultural training or employee support benefit, such as coaching. According to a recent study, intercultural training and support accounts for less than 1% of the total cost of an international assignment. It is one of the least expensive benefits in a well-rounded global mobility program. Conversely, expatriate assignment assistance and support is one of the most valuable tools with which you can equip your global employees, delivering a significant return on investment.

So, for 1% of the cost of the assignment, your employees can start their new lives with confidence, well-equipped to navigate the unfamiliar country that they are about to call home.

It is safe to assume that most expatriates and their families want to be successful in their life in their new country. Coaching can be viewed as a flexible, adaptive and responsive service, in that it is uniquely designed to assist an expatriate assignee, their partner and family in meeting the challenges of expatriate living. This is a win-win proposition for the expatriate and their family and for their international company that has put much at stake in having expatriate assignments help to fulfil on their business strategies globally.

Charles Darwin said: "It is not the intellectual who survives but the one who is able to adapt best to the changing environment".

Take advantage of all the fantastic opportunities an expat assignment offers. Expat life is what you make of it!



## REFERENCES

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