

## **Repatriating the Expat – Challenges and Opportunities**

**SIETAR EUROPA Conference, Brussels, March 2000**

### **Executive Summary:**

Many European companies emphasize the need for a more mobile, and interculturally literate workforce. While an increasing number of organisations make use of pre-departure trainings, re-entry support still remains the exception. In this article, it is suggested that it is helpful to look at the re-entry process in a systemic, multi-perspectivistic way. The article portrays different challenges faced by the returnee and his or her family, by the receiving unit at home, and by the HR manager. Solutions on how to manage a re-entry process are put forward. A well-managed re-entry process can significantly contribute to international organisational learning and increases the willingness of staff to accept assignments abroad.

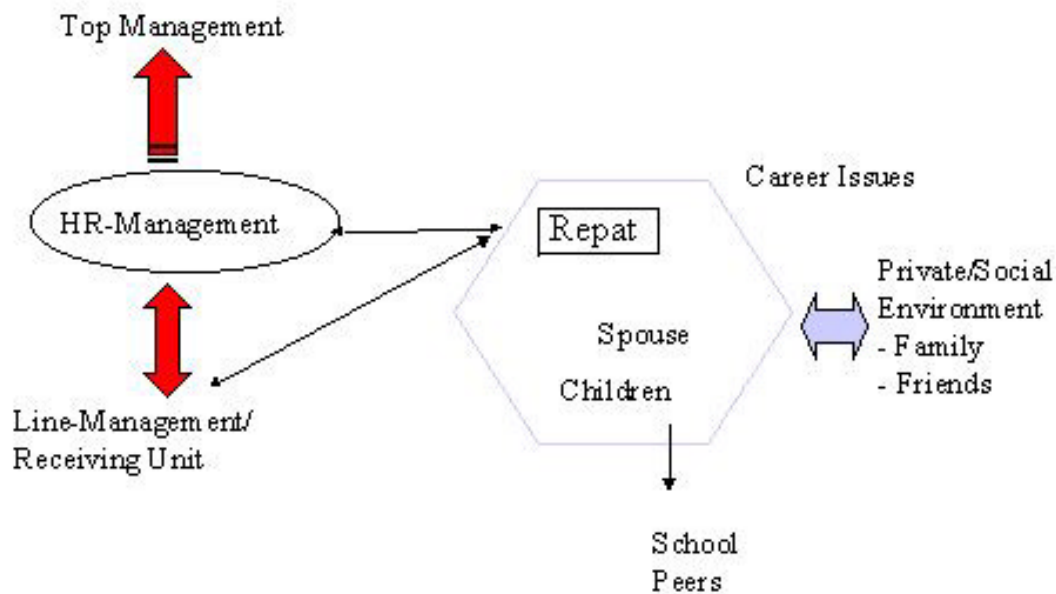
**If you are interested in a workshop on re-entry-issues, please contact us at [dialog@kultur-und-management.com](mailto:dialog@kultur-und-management.com)**

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## 1. Introduction

The re-entry process can be seen a complex transition process, which not only affects the returnee (and family) but touches upon many the social systems (i.e. friends, family, work environment...) the returnee is part of. The challenges for each member of the social system, however, are different and specific.

While it is common corporate practice to view the re-entry adaptation as the returnee's personal issue, we suggest that it is more appropriate to look at the management of the reentry process as facilitating a change process in the whole system, supported by the organisation's HR management. In this way, reintegration of returning expatriates can not only soften the blows of adaptation for the returnees, but can also serve as an opportunity for organisational learning and transformation.



HR management plays a pivotal role in changing organisations' approach towards the reentry process. The contributions of HR staff to changed practices in the management of reentry processes are the following:

- Conceptualising a re-entry management process
- Building acceptance for such a programme within the organisation
- Implementing the re-entry programmes.

Below, please find outlines of solutions to these challenging tasks. This represent the combined insights of the workshop participants and those of the facilitators.

## 2. Framework for Managing a Re-Entry-Process

No international assignment is complete without a successful repatriation. It is crucial to have a sequence of steps in place, to guide everyone through the whole process.

***Actually, repatriation begins when the expat hasn't even left the home country.*** A long-term career plan should be discussed between the employee, his or her (\* in the subsequent sections, for ease of reading, we use the male form only, with the understanding that this form includes both male and female returnees) superior and the HR manager before expatriation: Since it won't be possible for HR management to promise a certain position without losing credibility, outlining the path to be followed would be important. In case this path has to be changed due to organisational requirements, this should be discussed with the repatriation as soon as possible.

The ***actual planning for repatriation starts about a year before the end of the contract.*** First of all, it should be considered if returning to the home company would be the appropriate step.

The alternatives are:

- Extension of expatriation (new expat-contract).
- Transfer to host-country (contract to local condition).
- Expatriation to a third country<sup>1</sup>.

The following parties should be involved in the planning process:

The employee himself should write a report that includes a self-assessment and describes career goals. The report should include: competencies acquired abroad, the main experiences, expectations and perspectives for the future (Keeping a journal during the expatriation makes it often easier.). Also, the expat should be encouraged to write proposals how his experiences abroad can be used in the company.

HR managers of home- and host-country (together with the line-manager in the host-country who is senior to the expat) should assess the skills<sup>2</sup> that the expat has gained during the experience abroad.

The HR manager of the home-country reviews potential job-openings together with the boss of the home unit and other line managers.

The line manager senior to the expat in the host country also has to ensure succession-planning (in co-operation with the HR-manager).

During the whole expatriation, ***providing information*** – esp. on organizational changes and new projects – is ***extremely important***: Help the repatriation understand communication channels. The responsibility for the information flow is shared between the home unit and the expat. Written information should be complemented by regular visits to the home company. These visits also help the expat to maintain contact and to sustain his or her professional network. Furthermore, the expat doesn't have the feeling to be „out of sight, out of mind“.

A good idea would be to ***assign a mentor*** to every expat, whose tasks are to maintain contact and to support the expat, esp. with finding an appropriate position after expatriation. Mentors should have their own experiences with international assignments and should not be direct superiors of the expat.

***Nine to six months before returning home***, the repat, the HR-manager of the home-country and the superior discuss which of the available jobs best fit the expat's capabilities and the organization's needs. Personal and professional expectations of the repat have to be clarified in order to identify any possible misunderstandings or incorrect assumptions (e.g. that an international assignment automatically makes the repat move up the career ladder). If possible, arrange a home leave for the expat in order to prepare the reentry. This can also be used for interviews with other managers who have open positions which require the skills of the repat.

***Six to three months before repatriation***, the relocation process to the foreign location and the ways in which the employee and his family have changed because of this experience should be reviewed, either with the help of an HR person or during a training session. This session can also be used to prepare the repat and his family for the process of reintegrating into the work and social environment at home. Furthermore, the professional reentry of the spouse has to be considered at this point in time at the latest. Explanation of the company's moving policies and repatriation programs and information about housing at home should be given at this point in time, too.

***The last three months before the return trip*** should be reserved for organizational purposes, finishing current project and saying "goodbye" to all the people the family has met during their time in the host country.

Even though the company provides support, the repat has to take responsibility for a successful international assignment, that is to say, the returnee ought to:

- Be actively involved in all questions concerning the assignment and the future perspectives.
- Maintain contact to the home company and especially the department he worked for before he left – don't forget home while you are abroad, and – even more important: Don't let them forget about you.
- Ask for support when needed.
- Pass on his experiences.
- Develop a personal action plan.

Just as little as the repatriation only begins when the boxes are packed it ends with the arrival at the home airport. Similar to the integration process in a foreign environment, the ***return process*** takes a few months. Thus, measures are to be taken (mainly by the HR department, but a couple of points of the following list should be borne in mind by the boss and the colleagues of the repat) in order to make repatriation successful.

***The first few weeks after returning home:***

The HR department should consider taking the following steps:

- Have an open ear for the needs of the repat and his family; ask what you could do in order to make re-adjustment easier for them--of course, this doesn't mean that everything could be done.
- Organize a reentry training with an external trainer (or offer an internal co-trainer) for the

repatriate and his family.

- Show repatriates that the company cares about their international experiences and is willing to make room for their input in terms of inter-company knowledge management.
- Help make future relocations successful, determine the personal characteristics and attitudes that contribute to a successful international assignment.
- Involve the repats. Ask the repatriated family to help with the orientation of other future expats and repats.

### *Three to six months after returning home*

- Validation of the employee's reentry culture shock by discussing adjustment styles, pace and feelings. Spouses should take part in this session.
- Encourage the repatriate to write a proposal for ways in which the company can use his international skills, and intercompany insights at that specific foreign location.
- Reassessment of the adjustment process to identify any remaining problems that the employee and his family might be having.
- Feedback about the process of the international assignment, esp. the reintegration process.

## **3. Significant Others: „Selling“ Re-Entry Programmes to Top- and Line-Management**

Due to a number of reasons, including the prevailing corporate cultures and management styles, many HR departments face resistance against spending time and money on re-integration. Thus, „selling“ the value of re-entry programs to both top- and line-management becomes a crucial factor for establishing re-entry programs.

The following steps and arguments can be useful to convince top- and line-management that re-entry-programs are money well-spent:

- Prepare and present figures and statistics: How much does an expatriation cost? How much of that is spent on repatriation? What are the objectives of the investment?
  - Argue for the financial value of re-entry-programs: Cost of increased staff turnover of returning expats versus costs of measures to keep them in the company.
  - Quote best practices of other companies (even better: competitors), to strengthen your arguments
  - Look for academic research to support your position
  - Consider inviting an outside „expert“ to do a lecture or workshop on the subject. It is often surprising to experience that outsiders often get more attention for the same ideas.
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- Explain the gains of re-entry programs for the organisation:
    - Higher motivation of the returnee
    - Faster adaptation at home, thus better input in the team
    - Support of future willingness to be mobile (both for the returnee, and others observing the process)
    - Integrating and utilising know-how from abroad

- Danger of losing knowledge to competitors
- Less friction in the returning unit.
- Point out the managers' responsibility to make sure that \$\$\$ spent on expatriation really work to the advantage of the team in the home location
- Emphasize the link between the success of globalisation strategies and HR programs
- Look for managers who are willing to help you promote your cause
- Be persistent, and look at what each of the managers might consider useful from their perspective - and sell them on that point.

## 4. Issues and Solutions

### 4.a) The Receiving Unit

The responsibilities of the receiving unit (esp. the role of the superior), such as the discussion of a long-term career plan and providing information throughout the assignment, have already been mentioned above. But there is one more important aspect for the receiving unit before the repat comes back: The team requires some cross-cultural training in order to be able to understand the returnee's perspective and not to misinterpret the actions and words of the returnee. Those who stayed at home should be prepared that a different person – somebody they don't know – will come home.

These hints might help those who receive the repat upon his or her return:

- Take into account the disappointment of the returnee: He had expectations concerning his situation at home, wants to bring back what he has learned abroad etc. Moreover, many repats have to get used to the idea, that they are not somebody special anymore. Abroad, he might have had a much bigger responsibility and has lived in a privileged situation.
- The team (including repat) should be motivated to work towards a common goal: This unites the team and clarifies the contributions of every team-member to the achievement of the goal. The team needs to understand the „value“ of returnee, but the repat himself has to see that the others also have a lot to offer and to contribute.
- The team needs to educate the returnee, too: The team should share its expectations, thoughts ...
- Evaluate the returnee's position: Where does he come from in terms of position & responsibility, lifestyle etc.
- Make sure the returnee is given the opportunity to use & integrate knowledge: Giving him a chance to present what he can add to the team would be one step to do so, but should be done with caution: It might be perceived as bragging.

### 4.b) The Returnee (Spouse, Children)

For the returnee, both **family and career issues** require attention:

Each member of the family faces different challenges. Therefore, it is important to communi-

cate about the reentry process within the family, so that the most appropriate solutions can be worked out.

Typically, the following **issues** arise:

- High expectations of home-coming, which might be unrealistic (glorified home-country)
- Returnee expects recognition and career-move upon return
- Non-working spouse might underestimate difficulties of job-search at home
- If returnee and/or spouse are looking for a completely new start in the job-market at home (no return to the previous employer), this can be a very frustrating and challenging situation, as they may not be received with „open arms“
- Insufficient knowledge of re-entry issues
- Children will be foreigners at home, might hate school, will need lots of support
- Finding new friends who appreciate international experience might not be easy
- Family and friends at home do not understand the experiences abroad

The following steps can be part of a **solution**:

All areas of life:

- Pro-active approach to repatriation, information-search, early preparation
- Maintaining home contacts, both private and professional, while abroad
- Network with other repats and people with international experience

Career management:

- Communicate expectations to company
- Think through career-plans (be flexible, short-term, long-term aspects)

Family:

- Extra home-stays for children during sojourn
- Consider leaving teenagers to stay on at school abroad, or have them attend an international school at home
- Make use of counselling
- Meet other international families with children

#### **4.c) Reentry Training**

Reentry training should be offered to the returnee, the spouse and children. Typically, such a training is of one or two days' duration. The objectives of this training are to help the returnees get some closure on their experiences abroad, as well as putting the experiences of a reverse culture shock into perspective. During the trainings, participants get the opportunity to talk about their experiences – and to be heard.

The training process helps the participants to

- integrate some of their experiences
- understand that their feelings are part of an adaptation process (and not a personal deficit)

- develop coping strategies
- overcome feelings of disorientation and loneliness.

If the training is conducted in groups of returnees (returning from the same culture), an added benefit is that the returnees may form a network to support each other in their further integration process.

Since a reentry-training can be a very personal and emotional process, organisations are well advised to have an external trainer conduct the training. This allows for a maximum of trust and „breathing space“. If HR-mangement aims to get direct feedback or an „atmosphere check“ from the returnees, it is more appropriate to either hold a one-on-one debriefing session, or to join the re-entry training at a pre-arranged time at the very end of the training session.

## **5. Conclusion**

If organisations want to strengthen their global outlook and want to communicate convincingly to their employees that intercultural experience is a high priority, and that such learning is valued by the organisation, it is important that they put greater emphasis on the structured management of re-entry processes. The pay-off is tangible: Decreased staff fluctuation among returnees, increased motivation, better international knowledge management in the organisation, improved staff willingness to accept international assignments and increased overall flexibility of the organisation to adopt to new corporate environments. Can global players really do without these?

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### **(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> It should be borne in mind that repatriation becomes more difficult after longer stays abroad. A better strategy would be to repatriate the employee and only expatriate him again after a couple of years in the home country.

<sup>2</sup> The involvement of both HR managers ensures that the criteria of skill-assessment are understood on both sides.