

Critical success factors for working abroad – how to avoid costly mistakes

05/05/2009

Category: Global mobility

You've just heard that you're going ex pat - representing your company in one of its overseas markets. This is both exciting and daunting. So how can you make it a successful assignment?

1. Be prepared

Do the research on the country that you are going to as opposed to simply the job that you are going to. Most expatriate assignments fail because executives are unable to adapt successfully to the country, its culture and the way that people do business rather than a failure to do the actual job they are sent to do.

There are plenty of books about doing business in any given country – some are serious some are humorous. Buy them ALL and read them ALL before you go. Also find people who have lived and worked where you are going. Talk to them, ask them lots of questions. Listen carefully – what worked best for them to “get things done”?

2. Leave your comparisons at the airport

Being keen to add value fast and prove it was worth sending you out there, can often lead executives to get into a vicious cycle of “this is not how we do it back home”. Comparisons build up in people’s minds and they can jump in too fast, pushing to change the system and putting locals’ backs up.

Having then been frustrated at any local resistance the expat feels impotent and focuses their increased frustration at other negative comparisons. I have come across many a fuming foreigner who has cornered themselves in this way and got well and truly stuck.

The way out of this cycle leads me on to tip three and four...

3. Adapt and be flexible

When you see something being done differently ask people why they do it that way. Ask from curiosity not from your own preconceived ideas or judgement. Remember to delve into the assumptions the local team or individuals are making and the data that they are using. What assumptions would you make using the same data? How is it different? Avoid conclusions until you have thoroughly explored the different assumptions. What does the adaptable, flexible solution look like given the information?

Remember you will be successful if you adapt to the new country rather than trying to make it adapt to you.

4. Get out and about

Often the anxiety of arriving somewhere new and wanting to make an impact quickly at work can cause executives to get stuck in the office behind their desks. It's really important, especially at the beginning to get out and about into the market place. Meet the people at the front end of your business and your clients along with other expats. Discover the infrastructure of the market place that you are operating in. Get a feel quickly for what is going on and how it is going on.

5. Respect the customs and traditions of the host country

This sounds simple but is easy to get wrong. An early mistake can make it very difficult to build relationships if you have unwittingly caused some kind of offence. It can come down to small and simple things (in Hungary when you leave to go to the bathroom you never mention even discreetly where you are going). In Arab countries showing the sole of your shoe is a deep insult and is easily done when sitting crossed legged in a meeting. Knowing the local customs and traditions is where the preparatory research and reading is invaluable and must not be underestimated.

6. Learn as much of the language as you can

People always appreciate that you are making an effort with their language. It's an act of common courtesy to get the basics of the language under your belt. I have often heard complaints about executives who have made no effort despite being in a market for a good few years. A good command of the local language provides a whole new level of insight into the psyche and mores of a culture. The respect this generates and the practical benefits of being able to understand better when negotiating are obvious advantages.

7. Expect the unexpected

When on home turf one becomes accustomed to being able to read between the lines and be pretty good at second guessing how things might go. It's easy to get used to a certain predictability level. When you go overseas your "predictability quotient" disappears. Accepting this and expecting the unexpected can save you a lot of angst. This attitude will also enable you to act quickly when the unexpected does occur rather than wasting time feeling flummoxed.

8. Communicate, communicate, communicate

If you thought that keeping people posted and finding out what other people are thinking is important at home it's even more important now. By definition you will have been sent to bring some different angles to what gets done locally. You cannot therefore go completely native. You have got to be able to take people with you as you bring some new ideas to bear.

9. Remember the rest of the family

One of the major causes of failure in an ex-pat assignment is that the rest of the family does not adapt to the new country. The emotional and psychological transition for other family members is huge. They will be facing the loss of their old lives, friends and familiar things. They do not have the focus of the new job to get their teeth in to. It's really important to build into your schedule enough time in the early weeks and months to spend time with the family helping them to make the transition.

This is one of the most overlooked aspects of making a success of an overseas role. I have seen many executives spend all their waking hours working, only to find out after four or five months that they have an ultimatum – the job or their wives/husbands and families. Part of the early negotiation with the line manager needs to acknowledge that family time must be allowed for in the early weeks and months.

10. Have fun

Most assignments have an exciting and interesting aspect which is why you will have accepted in the first place. However, if your new role and location turns out not to be what you had hoped for, remember, it's only for a relatively short time. There is always something interesting to be learned and interesting people to meet even in the toughest of locations. The assignment is not forever so make sure to have some fun.