
Getting the Job Done Over There: Improving Expatriate Productivity

Allan Bird and Roger Dunbar

Despite increased participation in international markets, poor performance and failure rates of U.S. expatriate managers remain high. Major factors contributing to failure include a manager's inability to adjust to the job, inability to adjust to the new culture, or a manager's spouse and family's inability to adjust to the new assignment. Strategies to improve expatriate productivity include organizational support in the form of improved job training, cultural and language training, predeparture and postarrival mentoring, and health and stress-reduction training. This support should also be extended to the spouse and other family members.

Every year tens of thousands of businesspeople venture abroad on international assignments. Some stay for a few days, others a few weeks or months, and still others stay for a few years. All seek to accomplish some task or mission of importance to the organizations they represent. Many fail.

Estimates of the number of international assignments ending in failure range from 25 to 50 percent. Moreover, estimates of failed assignments do not include instances in which the assignment was completed, but at a minimally acceptable level of performance. It has been estimated that an additional 30 to 50 percent of American expatriates stay in their international assignments, but are regarded as either marginally effective or ineffective by their organization. According to evidence accumulated over the past twenty years, roughly only one in three managers sent overseas gets the job done the way headquarters wanted it done. And, despite all the talk about globalization, there is no clear indication that the situation is greatly improving.

Estimates of the cost of an individual failure range from \$40,000 to \$250,000. These figures represent tangible costs of failure to organizations; they do not include such intangible costs as the loss of goodwill or of business opportunities irretrievably lost to the firm, nor do they consider the personal, psychological, and financial costs to individual employees and their families. At the national level, annual estimates of the cost of failed assignments to U.S. business is calculated in the billions of dollars.

There is plenty of room for productivity improvement among expatriate managers. Broadly speaking, organizations can seek improvement along two fronts: First, they can reduce the number of failed assignments and early returns; second, they can raise performance among managers who complete international assignments poorly. Though these two fronts differ in some ways, they require fundamentally the same set of solutions.

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PERCEPTIONS OF THE ASSIGNMENT

For many managers, their first expatriate assignment represents a major departure from anything they have previously experienced. They are confronted with a challenging new assignment, frequently in a strange and unfamiliar country. Beyond the job itself, there is the challenge of moving themselves and their families to a foreign land, establishing a new home, and settling into a new lifestyle, one quite different from that which they left.

When moving overseas, expatriates and their families are attuned to and initially fascinated by the novelty of the new job and the new culture. The attention paid to newness and difference is not surprising. Indeed, much of the research on expatriate assignments has been similarly predicated on the premise that a foreign posting is unlike any other assignment, transfer, or promotion a manager might receive. This is unfortunate because it diverts attention away from the many similarities that an expatriate posting has to other job transitions. The difference between a domestic and an overseas assignment is more a matter of degree than substance. Both share elements of newness and uncertainty, both contain elements of surprise and discomfort. This is not to suggest that differences between domestic and overseas assignments are small. Moving from New York to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, is likely to require a far greater adjustment than one from New York to Chicago. Nevertheless, taking note of similarities enhances the ability to understand the challenges that expatriate managers confront and increase their productivity.

An overseas assignment is like a domestic transfer in that it requires a role transition. A manager leaves one role with all of its attendant responsibilities, relationships, and patterns of behavior, and takes on a new one. Viewing expatriate assignments as role transitions is useful because there is a great deal of information about transitional experiences that can be applied to international managers.

For starters, all transitions require separation and exit from previous roles. In moving to a new job, a newly transferred manager must let go of or alter patterns of behavior that were appropriate to the previous role: Work responsibilities differ and reporting relationships change, as do the expectations of a new set of superiors, subordinates, and colleagues. However, the tendency is to evaluate and make sense of the new role using an understanding of the old one. Memories of the old role frequently serve as an anchor, providing an apparent source of stability to a new situation, but also inhibiting adjustment to new behavioral and sense-making modes. Reliance on old role experiences may be useful when the new role does not differ much from the old one. But this is generally not the case with expatriate assignments. Roles are likely to change in dramatic and significant ways. To understand those ways, let us examine a typical expatriate assignment using elements of a job characteristics model developed by J. R. Hackman and Gary Oldham in 1976.

The job characteristics model identifies five core job dimensions:

1. *Skill variety* refers to the degree to which a job requires a variety of different activities to do the work. One of the most distinctive features

of an expatriate assignment is the requirement of different skills. Unlike headquarters, foreign subsidiaries usually lack the luxury of a large support staff. Work previously delegated to subordinates frequently must be carried out by the managers themselves. One expatriate, the head of the Japanese branch of a major U.S. air-conditioner manufacturer, ran a literally one-man operation. Relying extensively on temporary workers for clerical support, he represented the company in dealings with government officials, involvement in industry associations, and negotiations with major clients. He also supervised the delivery of goods to Japanese customers, as well as managed the company's market expansion activities in Japan. His widely varied responsibilities called for an equally wide set of skills and talents.

First-time expatriate assignees are often ill-prepared for the range of activities they are required to engage in and, though they may possess the requisite skills, may not be sufficiently prepared to apply what they know. The uncertainty of doing business in a new culture clouds the determination of what task-related skills are required to get the job done. Chinese negotiators, for example, are known for being initially disinclined to move off an established bargaining position. A negotiator experienced in dealing with Americans, who are generally more willing to modify their bargaining position, may, when entering for the first time into negotiations with the Chinese, possess the set of skills needed for success, but may be uncertain as to when and how to apply them. In this sense, skill variety for an expatriate manager also includes those talents and abilities related to performing well within the host country culture. A variety of cultural adjustment skills, grouped into three categories, are presented in Table 1.

2. *Task identity* refers to the degree to which the job requires the completion of an identifiable piece of work. The leaner composition of foreign subsidiaries results in managers being responsible for a larger share

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Table 1

Three Categories of Skills Related to Cross-Cultural Adjustment		
<i>Self Orientation</i>	<i>Others Orientation</i>	<i>Perceptual Orientation</i>
Stress Reduction	Relationship skills	Flexible attributions
Reinforcement substitution	Willingness to communicate	Broad category width
Physical mobility	Nonverbal communication	High tolerance for ambiguity
Technical competence	Respect for others	Being nonjudgmental
Dealing with alienation	Empathy for others	Being open-minded
Dealing with isolation	Language skills	Field independence
Realistic expectations prior to departure		
Note: For a more detailed discussion of each of these variables see "The Dimensions of Expatriate Acculturation: A Review," by M. Mendenhall and G. Oddou in <i>Academy of Management Review</i> 10 (1985).		

of the job to which they are assigned. For example, if they had been involved in human resource planning back at headquarters, a large support staff and a higher degree of specialization meant that they would have worked on only a part of the plan—for instance, estimating human resource needs over the next five years. The remainder of the planning—calculating labor costs, determining training needs, etc.—would have been handled by others. Not so in the foreign subsidiary.

Being involved in whole tasks can be threatening when one is uncertain about numerous aspects of the host country and its environment. An expatriate manager responsible for the entire marketing plan for South Korea can find it a daunting exercise. Market demand information is less complete there than it is in the United States, purchasing patterns vary, use of push-and-pull marketing techniques differs, distribution systems are more complex, and a fluctuating exchange rate introduces uncertainty in pricing. Even with a support staff that is knowledgeable, a first-time expatriate confronts a measure of uncertainty not encountered when drawing up a marketing plan domestically.

3. *Task significance* is the degree to which the job substantially affects the lives or work of other people, in the immediate organization or in the external environment. The total dollar value in sales and strategic worth to the firm of its U.S. Midwest region may be greater than that of a foreign subsidiary. But because the subsidiary encompasses an entire country, it carries a larger sense of significance. Its importance is made more evident through the various signals an expatriate receives once new duties are assumed. Increases in social status, financial earnings, and job title are common accoutrements of an international assignment.

Heightened visibility within the company may be an additional by-product of the assignment, offering further evidence of the job's significance. For example, one expatriate account executive in a U.S. telecommunications company found himself playing golf with his firm's senior executives when he arranged for a major Japanese client to attend a company-sponsored golf tournament. It was an opportunity not available to managers in domestic positions two or three ranks above him.

4. *Autonomy* is the extent to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to an individual in scheduling work and carrying it out. Though they may work to deadlines set by the head office, expatriate managers tend to experience greater autonomy than they did in their previous jobs because they frequently function in smaller, less formally structured operating units. Geographic and psychological distance between home country and headquarters can foster a feeling of freedom. At the same time, autonomy, particularly if expatriates are not prepared for it, may bring on feelings of isolation and helplessness, a sense that no one understands or cares what they are going through. Constant contact with the head office through telephones, faxes, and even field visits by superiors may allay feelings of isolation. On the other hand, communication with the head office may heighten perceptions of isolation if it is perceived as insensitive to local conditions.

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5. *Feedback* refers to the degree to which carrying out work activities results in obtaining direct and clear information about the effectiveness of performance. Sources of feedback for expatriates are less plentiful and more infrequent than they are at headquarters. Being overseas means having less access to informal networks that provide stateside staff with feedback outside the normal organization channels. Formal performance appraisals tend to occur less frequently and are more often conducted by people who have had less contact with the expatriate manager than is true for domestic managers.

Feedback through performance outcomes is also problematic. Financial statements of a foreign subsidiary are subject to manipulation by headquarter strategists in pursuit of corporate objectives. Transfer pricing in order to avoid tax exposure or to shift profits from one subsidiary to another creates inaccurate and misleading financial statements, making it difficult to adequately assess expatriate performance. Moreover, exchange-rate fluctuations can further dilute the usefulness of financial statements as a source of feedback.

Taken as a whole, the core job dimensions portray expatriate assignments as having large skill variety, high task identity, high task significance, high autonomy, and low feedback. Consequently, expatriates are likely to perceive their assignments as meaningful, their responsibilities as large, and their feedback as inadequate.

Pervading all five dimensions is a heightened level of uncertainty brought on by working in a foreign environment where values, norms, rules, and customs differ, amplifying the stress induced by working in positions that expatriates perceive as heavy-laden with responsibility and importance. When high uncertainty is coupled with perceptions of primary responsibility for significant work and low feedback, the result is a high-stress assignment.

THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL AND FAMILY LIFE

The stress of an expatriate assignment affects all areas of a foreign manager's life. Individual interaction with the host country and culture, along with a spouse's or family's adjustment, generates further stress, the cumulative effect of which can be deteriorating performance at work, divorce, a breakdown of the family, or even a nervous breakdown of the individual.

Survey research findings indicate that the primary cause of early termination of expatriate assignment is the failure of the spouse to adjust. While an expatriate may have work to consume both attention and time, spouses (the vast majority of whom are women) find themselves in new surroundings in which they do not know how to accomplish even the most rudimentary daily tasks. A simple thing such as shopping for groceries can require great effort, both physical and mental. Many Americans are used to doing grocery shopping on a weekly basis. They drive their cars to supermarkets where they use shopping carts, buy lots of food, load it in their cars and drive home, where they store it in plentiful cupboard and refrigerator space. In Japan, houses are smaller, storage space less plentiful, supermarkets tiny, and parking lots almost nonexistent. To shop for

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groceries on a weekly basis requires careful planning and strong arms to carry bags. Moreover, familiar foods may be hard to locate, requiring either an adjustment in eating habits or family budget.

Much of the spousal and family adjustment is unanticipated. Expatriate families experience different levels of consciousness as they move into an international assignment. In the first stage of awareness, most of the manager's thoughts are centered on whether or not to accept an international posting, with consideration given to career issues and the possible effects of a foreign living experience on the spouse and children. Once a decision has been made to accept the assignment, awareness shifts and the focus becomes one of transitional logistics: What to do about mortgage payments? When will the movers come? Where will the children go to school? Where is the new house located? What about doctors and dentists? etc. The details identified and addressed in this stage are important and relate directly to an expatriate family's sense of well-being and security. At the same time, they do not take into consideration the larger sociocultural context of the host country. Family members enter the third stage of awareness shortly after their arrival in the host country, when they come into full contact with the new culture. During this third stage of awareness expatriates experience the cycle of readjustment known as "culture shock." This cycle begins with an underlying expectation, despite intellectual knowledge to the opposite, that people in the new culture will really be like us. Initially, culturally different behavior is novel and so it is more easily accommodated. Over time, perceptions of novelty wane. What was cute is no longer so. As they recede into the background, cultural differences become weeds and thorns in everyday life. They get in the way of doing things the way the family used to do them.

The pressures and constraints of work and contact with headquarters buffer the effects of cultural differences for the expatriate manager. For spouse and children there are fewer buffers. As the wife of one expatriate in Japan put it, "You can only do so much flower arranging and tea ceremony. Then you have to get on with life. But it's as though the Japanese won't let you."

It is rumored that at one time in the 1950s, before trans-Pacific flights, living in Japan was so stressful for wives of American expatriates that the U.S. military would fly home those wives who suffered nervous breakdowns. Though there appears to be no evidence to confirm this rumor, the fact that it is perceived by many as credible indicates how stressful living overseas can be.

Once novelty wears off, expatriates react to the new culture, with feelings of fear or anger. At this point some expatriates withdraw from the new culture. They flee back home. They hide out in the local "American club." They stop socializing with others, host-country and expatriate acquaintances alike. Sometimes they even withdraw from involvement with their families. Others, aware of their reactions, carefully reflect on the true cause and in that way are able to put aside their anger, irritation, or fear. With those feelings under control, they are able to observe the situation and think more objectively and openly about what is going on. As expatriates repeatedly experience this

cycle, they develop culturally appropriate expectations about the behaviors of others and themselves. Only the expatriates who, along with their families, successfully negotiate their way through the cycle of readjustment can get the job done over there. But there are ways to help all expatriates and their families make critical cultural adjustments.

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GETTING MORE OF THE JOB DONE OVER THERE

To lower the incidence of failure and raise productivity among expatriates, individuals and organizations can take a number of steps. Before moving overseas, prospective expatriates begin to make certain adjustments. They try to determine the ways in which their work and personal life will change, they try to prepare for those changes and, when possible, they make adjustments before arriving in the host country.

Determining what and how to adjust is based both on an individual's past experiences and on perceptions of where gaps exist in his or her abilities, skills, and knowledge. For example, a manager who perceives an overseas assignment as imposing high demands on technical skills will be inclined to spend more predeparture time improving those skills rather than studying the local language.

Individual motivation and curiosity about the host country will also influence the type of preparation a manager does. As shown in **Table 2**, when a manager's desired level of cultural understanding is combined with expectations of host culture interaction, preferred outcomes will vary. For example, a manager expecting high levels of interaction with the host culture may pursue either a broad and detailed cultural understanding or a specific understanding based on characteristics of given situations. Such managers are likely to value seminars on the host country and meetings with repatriated managers who have had experience in that country. They are also likely to consult trainers and others who specialize in cultural adaptation, value preposting acculturation trips to the host country, and take advantage of opportunities for adaptational experiences. By contrast, managers who expect low levels of interaction may be more inclined to pursue analytic or distant types of cultural understanding. They would value informational material about the host country and how to work through specific situations.

Table 2

Relationship between Desired Level of Cultural Understanding and Expected Level of Interaction with Host Culture			
Expected Level of Interaction with Host Culture		Desired Level of Cultural Understanding	
		Broad & Detailed	Specific as Necessary
	High	Deep	Partial
	Low	Analytic	Distant

Once an organization recognizes how differences in motivations, expectations, and needs among prospective expatriate managers influence the type of adjustment required, it can consider various strategies to help make the adjustment to the host country a smooth and productive one. These strategies include:

Language Training

The ability to speak the host country language constitutes one of the primary keys in adjustment and productivity. Managers who are able to communicate with host country personnel and clients fluently are able to accomplish routine work more quickly and with a lower probability of miscommunication and error. Lacking fluency, expatriate managers must rely on local people who speak English or on interpreters, both of which may be costly and time-consuming.

Language training, however, is also costly and time-consuming. Although training techniques and assessments vary, it is estimated that working fluency in a foreign language takes anywhere from six months to two years to achieve. Few firms have enough money or staff to be able to afford policies of full fluency for expatriate managers. Moreover, fluency may neither be desired nor required of managers in certain overseas assignments. Therefore, companies should carefully evaluate the level of interaction required in different expatriate positions and provide language training accordingly. Managers who will spend the vast amount of their time in liaison with the head office may not need language training, whereas those who will spend most of their time with host country clients or supervising host country personnel will.

There is a strong reason for providing language training to all expatriate managers, however. Cultural anthropologists have long noted that language shapes the way people perceive their world. Knowledge of a foreign language enhances one's ability to understand people from that culture. Even in cases where language may not be critical to successful job performance, language training may facilitate better understanding of the host culture, which will be valuable in other contexts.

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Job Training

Surprisingly, many expatriates receive little preparation for their new position. In some instances job training may be unnecessary because individual managers are selected specifically on the basis of their job-related knowledge and skills. They are sent to accomplish specific tasks that they are uniquely qualified to perform. However, expatriate assignments are often viewed as growth experiences within the larger framework of an employee's development. That is, managers are sent overseas to develop skills and knowledge that they do not possess. In this case, companies can smooth adjustment and raise productivity by taking a more systematic approach to selection and employee development. Before selecting an employee for the assignment, the firm should establish

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minimal skill, knowledge, and experience standards that the potential expatriate must meet. This helps ensure that the company does not send abroad a manager who is ill-prepared or cannot cope. When a company must select an individual who does not meet such standards, it should provide pre-departure job training. It is important to note that empirical evidence repeatedly shows that job-related technical competence—that is, the ability to do the job correctly—is one of the primary determinants of successful expatriate job performance. An expatriate financial manager who is culturally well-adjusted is of little value if he or she does not possess the required financial skills and knowledge.

Cultural Training

When people receive an international assignment one of the first things they do is try to find out all they can about the host country. They talk to friends and acquaintances, they read books, and they talk to people from that country. Surprisingly, they receive little support or training directly from their companies. In companies where training is available, it is most often informational in nature, focusing on providing the prospective expatriate with factual material on the host country and culture. Company training programs that provide role-playing, simulations, or case study training to help the employee understand the new culture are rare. Yet, expatriate managers have indicated that immersion-oriented cultural training would better serve their needs.

Again, the requirements of the job should guide firms in determining what type of cultural training to provide. **Table 3** provides a list of several types of cross-cultural training and their relationship to expected levels of host culture interaction.

Table 3

Relationship between Level of Host Culture Interaction and Type of Cross-Cultural Training Approach	
Expected Level of Interaction with Host Culture	Cross-Cultural Training Approach
	High
	Low
	<p>IMMERSION APPROACH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment Center Field Experiences Simulations Sensitivity Training Extensive Language Training <p>AFFECTIVE APPROACH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural Assimilator Training Language Training Critical Incidents Case Study Stress Reduction Training Moderate Language Training <p>INFORMATIONAL APPROACH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Area Briefings Cultural Briefings Films/Books Use of Interpreters "Survival" Language Training
Note: Adapted from Mendenhall, Dunbar, and Oddou (1987).	

Traditionally, U.S. firms have drawn a line between work and personal life. In the case of expatriate assignments, that line should be blurred.

Companies should also consider providing cultural training to the expatriate's spouse and family. As noted previously, the inability of the spouse to adjust to the new culture is the major cause of expatriate failure and early return. Traditionally, U.S. firms have drawn a line between work and personal life. In the case of expatriate assignments, that line should be blurred.

Mentoring

Often considered a *passé* buzzword, mentoring is very important to expatriate managers. Prospective expatriates can profit in two ways from a company-sponsored mentoring program. Because being away from headquarters distances managers from decision-making that may directly affect them, having a mentor at the head office who can help sort through the reasoning behind decisions and offer a headquarters perspective can be invaluable. In addition, providing prospective expatriates with a mentor who has previously worked in the host country or who is intimately familiar with the new job can also serve to reduce a lot of the uncertainty that surrounds the transfer. Such a mentor can answer questions involving not only the job, but also those relating to family adjustment and settling in. Moreover, the mentor may be able to provide introductions to others in the host country who can also help the expatriate and family make a smooth transition.

Health and Stress-Reduction Training

Transitions are psychologically and physically stressful. With all of the rushing to get things packed and take care of passports, school records, and myriad other details, few people have or take the time to relax and prepare themselves for the trip. Tight schedules are further exacerbated by not allowing time to recuperate from the effects of jet lag. Upon arrival there is the additional stress of unpacking and settling in. New types of foods and changes in eating habits can cause further physical distress. Bodies become worn out and worn down. The result is that four of five expatriates experience some type of physical illness within six months of their arrival in the new country. Illness may range from a simple cold to a major bout of pneumonia. The point is that expatriates are not able to perform at optimal levels in their new assignments because they are physically and psychologically not up to it.

Companies can do much to reduce and avert health and stress problems by providing prospective expatriates with information on how to prepare for the move. Companies can also ensure that employees have adequate time to make the move and adjust to their new surroundings. But determining what constitutes "adequate time" can be difficult. One executive sent to Colombia was given three weeks to get everything in order. His company provided extensive support with logistical details, but he still had to explain to them what needed to be done. Within two weeks of arriving in Bogota, he found himself laid up in the hospital for three weeks, which placed further stress on his wife and children.

Postarrival Support

Companies should provide additional support to expatriates and their families once they arrive in the host country. Company-sponsored socialization programs for spouses and children can help expatriates through the initial adjustment phase. By organizing tours and visits to various cultural sites within the host country, a company can help expatriates and their families avoid withdrawal and isolation problems.

A second mentor, located in the host country, can help the new expatriate get up to speed and avoid business and social gaffes. Providing a mentor, confidante, or senior counselor who can give advice and direction while allowing the expatriate to function in the job is one way to reduce the expatriate's sense of uncertainty and to allay feelings of inadequacy.

Finally, companies can send strong messages that experimental behavior is acceptable. Cultural adjustment is a process of exploration and learning. Fear of punishment for straying from standard operating procedures or for making mistakes can seriously retard the adjustment process. Upon arrival in his new assignment, one manager made a commitment to himself that for the first six months he would not be embarrassed by any mistakes he might make. He would earnestly try to do things right, but he was not going to allow a fear of failure to inhibit his efforts to get the job done. He felt that six months gave him sufficient time to adjust and learn enough so that he could function effectively or at least know when to ask for help.

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A NEED TO DO MORE

Expatriate managers want to succeed, want to be productive, want to get the job done. When they do not, the costs are high—for the firm and for themselves. Companies can and must do more to help them succeed. Survey research conducted over the past twenty years indicates that many firms have made no significant effort to upgrade their expatriate selection and training programs. Given current failure rates ranging from 25 to 50 percent and annual failure costs that run in the billions of dollars, improving expatriate productivity is not just a good idea, it is an imperative.❶

Additional Resources

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