
Expatriate Predeparture Training, Onsite Consulting, and Repatriation Training

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China Staff Training and Development Manual

Introduction

Multinational companies send employees on international assignments for the purposes of coordinating local and headquarters management, enabling the transfer of technology, or gaining general exposure to international business practices and/or the business practices of headquarters. Although the number of employees selected for these assignments is relatively small, the investments companies make in these assignments are large.

Gaining full returns on the investments made in these employees (who, along with accompanying family members, are usually referred to as expatriates or “expats”) can be challenging. When expats prematurely resign from their assignments or are repatriated early by management, returns on these investments can be greatly diminished. In addition, when assignments are unsuccessful and result in problems such as demoralization or reduced productivity of the host workforce, or disruption of established relationships with partners, customers, vendors, or government officials, companies can suffer business interruptions or other indirect losses.

In order to maximize their investments, companies can provide a variety of services that support expats before, during, and after their international assignments. These services increase the likelihood that employees will successfully complete international assignments and meet business objectives.

This chapter will explain three types of services that provide substantial support for expats on international assignments, including expats on assignment to and from China. Special focus will be placed on the first service:

- **Predeparture and language training** to facilitate adjustment to living and working in the host country;
- **Onsite consulting** to address specific intercultural issues that arise during the assignment; and
- **Repatriation training** to facilitate return to the home country.

The information in this chapter is designed to assist human resources personnel in making appropriate recommendations and designing effective policies that can support Chinese expats who are on assignment in other countries, as well as expats from other locations who are on assignment in China.

Predeparture Training

Predeparture training (also known as “cultural orientation training”) introduces expats to the international assignment experience prior to their departure for the host country. The purpose of predeparture training is to prepare expats to live and/or work effectively in another culture, to interact appropriately with people of that culture, and to benefit personally from the international assignment experience. (Note: This service should not be mistaken for another service known as “relocation training,” which is an introduction to the day-to-day logistics of living in the host country and is delivered by international moving companies and other service providers shortly after expats arrive in the host country.)

A significant benefit of predeparture training is that it guides expats in developing realistic expectations for the international assignment. The following is an actual situation that might have been avoided had the expats involved received predeparture training:

A British man assigned to work in Beijing was certain that he would not encounter any problems; after all, his wife was Chinese. He assumed this had prepared him well for daily life in China. His wife, born in Shanghai, knew that she would miss some of the conveniences available in England, but otherwise thought the assignment would be like “going back home”. One year into the assignment, the husband was bitter and maladjusted, spending most of his time complaining about China and Chinese people to other British expats and his wife. His wife was a virtual recluse, associating only with her husband and one woman who shared her Chinese dialect. “Whenever I go out,” she said, “as soon as I open my mouth (and speak Chinese) people ask me where I’m from. They know I’m different. I don’t feel comfortable here”. Unfortunately, the expectations of this couple were not realistic and led to disappointment.

When companies select employees for international assignments, they tend to choose employees who have demonstrated technical expertise, management expertise, and/or growth potential. Knowledge of the culture and business environment of the host country is seldom a primary criterion for selection. Without this knowledge, many expats assume that the skills and strategies that made them successful in their home country will also make them successful in the host country. During predeparture training, expats are exposed to the idea that an inability to work within the local system often results in an inability to achieve business objectives, and they are given some insight into how the local system works and how to operate within it. This and other information provided during the training can guide expats and their families in developing realistic expectations about living and working in the host country.

Onsite Consulting

Onsite consulting provides guidance for expats in handling business and adjustment issues that arise during their international assignments. The purposes of onsite consulting are to

assist expats in assessing the approaches they use to handle such issues and to provide them with guidance in determining and implementing new approaches.

The focus of onsite consulting can be on business, performance, team, personal or family issues. Experienced intercultural consultants can work with expats to formulate approaches to managing current business issues and to develop contingency plans for handling issues that might arise in the future. To optimize the overall performance of expats in the local workplace, consultants can provide coaching on various performance issues. If expats are team managers, consultants can assist by facilitating team meetings and conducting team-building sessions, and by coaching expats in acting appropriately in these roles. If expats are members of a team, consultants can coach them in intercultural meeting participation and teamwork. Finally, consultants can counsel working expats and family members regarding issues of adjustment and family dynamics in the new environment.

A significant benefit of onsite consulting is that it targets real issues in a timely manner. The following are actual situations that could have been improved with onsite consulting:

An overseas Chinese manager working in China reported: "Sometimes I sit with local employees at lunch. People come to me with complaints. I want to tell my (Western) boss about the complaints. But he doesn't ask me about things". Being mindful of hierarchy, this manager hesitated to transmit bad news without being asked. The Western boss, on the other hand, assumed that because the overseas Chinese manager spoke English well, he would communicate in a direct manner.

A Chinese woman working in Germany wanted to show interest in and build close rapport with the "family" she worked with every day. Consequently, she made a daily investigation of the contents of her colleagues' mailboxes. She also frequently and overtly examined any papers lying on the desk of her German male boss. In the office as well as in meetings, she was coy and flirtatious with male colleagues; in particular, with her boss. She became confused and demotivated after her boss called her into his office and spoke to her in a very stern manner, telling her that her behavior must change.

Expats who have the advantage of onsite consulting are often able to handle issues before they escalate and thereby avoid negative repercussions for the themselves, their colleagues and the company.

Repatriation Training

Repatriation training reorients expats to their home country just prior to or just after their return. The purposes of repatriation training are: to guide expats and family members in reflecting on the personal changes they have experienced during their international assignments; to prepare them for changes within their home environment and organization; and to discuss with them how to apply the knowledge and skills that they have developed during the international assignment to future business and social situations.

A significant benefit of repatriation training is that it prepares expats to handle the unexpected changes they observe in themselves, their families, their friends, their organizations and their cultures. Had the expats in the following actual situations received repatriation training, they might have experienced less intense reactions to the repatriation phase of their international assignment and achieved greater productivity on the job:

An American man returned from his assignment in China to find that his next job was “not ready” for him yet. The company found him a small office to use in the interim. It had no windows. Completely isolated and disoriented, “I cried all the way home from work every day for a month,” he later told a friend. After a challenging but rewarding year in China, this former expat was unprepared to face challenges and disappointment at “home”. Within a year, he accepted a position with another company.

An Australian woman who had recently returned from an assignment in China felt so depressed and lethargic that she made an appointment to see her doctor. She could not understand why she was feeling that way. She had enjoyed her time in China, learned some Mandarin, and received excellent performance reviews. However, she was happy to be returning home to family and friends and to a new position in her company. She was surprised to find, though, that friends and colleagues were not very interested in hearing about her experiences in China, and her new boss did not show any interest in utilizing the skills and network she had developed during her international assignment. “Home” felt provincial and cold, her productivity on the job began to suffer, and she began to wish that she had requested an extension of her assignment in China.

As part of a comprehensive expat package, repatriation training can facilitate more rapid readjustment of employees and their families, foster earlier productivity in new assignments, and contribute to the retention of employees following international assignments. While experienced expats cite the benefits of repatriation training, many companies assume that “going home is easy” and, unfortunately, do not recognize the value of this service.

Benefits of Expat Support Services

The provision of expat support services has wide-ranging benefits for expats and their families, as well as for the companies that provide these services to their expats. Some of these benefits are outlined in the following table:

Benefits of Expat Support Services

Benefits for Employees and Families

- Enhanced understanding of and realistic expectations for the international assignment experience
- Smoother adjustment to each new phase of the assignment
- Ability to function more productively before, during, and after the assignment

Benefits for Companies

- Improved interpersonal relationships among expats and local staff
- Increased likelihood that business objectives will be achieved
- Decreased incidence of premature expat return and of attrition after return
- Increased satisfaction of expats with their assignments and greater willingness of employees to accept international assignments
- Improved global team performance

Focus on Predeparture Training: Participants

Studies repeatedly show that the most common reason for the premature repatriation of expats is that the family is unable to adjust to life in the host country. Therefore it is critical for non-working spouses to be included in predeparture training, or to receive separate training. Children above the age of seven can also benefit from specially designed predeparture training.

Adjustment is often difficult for non-working spouses, as the home environment in the host country does not automatically provide a daily routine or human contact. While working spouses have an office to go to and fellow employees with whom to interact, non-working spouses must create daily routines and seek interaction with local people (many of whom may have had little contact with foreigners). Predeparture training can help non-working spouses build realistic expectations and introduce them to the knowledge, attitudes and skills that facilitate smooth interaction.

Adjustment is also often difficult for children, as they must establish new friendships (usually with children of various nationalities), identify new leisure-time activities, and learn to function in a new educational environment. Predeparture training can guide children in developing realistic expectations and provide them with information about the new environment in which they will be living.

By including the non-working spouse and children in predeparture training, companies can increase the satisfaction of the entire family with the assignment and increase the likelihood that the employee and family will complete the assignment successfully.

Focus on Predeparture Training: Objectives

Well-designed predeparture training programs generally seek to achieve the objectives outlined in the following table:

Objectives of Predeparture Training Programs
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Build realistic expectations about the international assignment 2. Increase understanding of various aspects of the host country culture, society, and business environment 3. Prepare participants for potential culture shock in the host country and repatriation shock when they return home 4. Make participants more aware of their own “cultural baggage” (their behavior, perceptions, interpretations, attitudes, values, and ways of thinking) and how these are shaped by the culture in which they have grown up and by other cultures to which they have been exposed 5. Make participants aware of ways in which they could modify their behavior, attitudes and ways of thinking in order to communicate more effectively with people in the host country in a variety of business and social situations 6. Prepare working expats to handle job roles and responsibilities in ways that will be appropriate within the cultural and business contexts of the host country, and within the context of the receiving organization 7. Begin to build or increase fluency in a language of the host country 8. Increase understanding of various aspects of regional cultures, societies, and business environments in which the working expat expects to be doing business

Focus on Predeparture Training: Length of Training

The length of predeparture training varies greatly. Determining factors include: the commitment of senior management to providing the training, the budget available for the training, the working expat’s job role and responsibilities, the length of the assignment, the

amount of time the expats and people in the organization think can be allotted to the training, and the length and timing of any scheduled follow-up onsite consulting.

Many professional interculturalists recommend that employees in high visibility, senior management positions attend four to six weeks of predeparture training, that employees in more junior management positions attend at least two weeks of training, and that other employees attend a minimum of three days of training.

Depending on the skill and experience levels of participants at the beginning of training, programs of at least two weeks can generally achieve the eight objectives mentioned in the previous section of this chapter. Shorter programs may only briefly cover some of the objectives. The longer the program, the greater the depth in which each objective can be addressed.

Focus on Predeparture Training: Program Design

While many predeparture training programs are “off-the-shelf” programs, which are delivered in basically the same format for all participants, more effective programs are tailored to the specific needs and objectives of each participant.

In determining which topics to cover in a training program and how best to sequence the topics, experienced trainers consider the following:

- Corporate culture of the company as a whole
- Unique characteristics of the receiving organization
- Business objectives of the international assignment
- Job role and responsibilities of the working expat
- Expectations of people in the sending and receiving organizations concerning the international assignment
- Specific concerns, questions and interests of participants
- Personalities and interaction styles of the participants (especially in terms of how those personalities and styles might “fit” in the host country culture)
- Attitudes of the participants about living and working in the host country
- Location(s) in which the participants will be living and working in the host country
- Amount and destination of business travel that the working expat expects to do
- Learning styles of the participants

In order to obtain the information outlined above, trainers generally request that participants complete a written questionnaire describing their current roles and responsibilities, their prior exposure to the host culture and other cultures, and their specific concerns, questions, and interests. Trainers might also conduct pre-program interviews with the participants, with human resources personnel, and with any individuals to whom the working expat will report while on assignment.

Focus on Predeparture Training: Components of Basic Training

Some basic predeparture training programs are designed only to facilitate participants' acquisition of knowledge about the host country. More effective programs introduce the idea that participants may need to develop new attitudes and skills in order to flourish in the host country culture. These programs generally include the following five components:

Living in the Host Country:

- Presentation and discussion of general information about unique aspects of the host country social etiquette, housing, transportation, health care, communications, safety and security, leisure-time activities, child care, education, activities for children, and other practical issues.
- Development of personal objectives for the international assignment.
- Discussion of strategies for how expats can become involved in the host community by participating in sports, cultural events, educational events, and/or special interest activities.

Communicating across Cultures:

- Explanation of tools for interacting and communicating appropriately with people from other cultures, with emphasis on the host culture.
- Introduction to the stages and challenges of adjustment to living and working in other cultures, as well as the challenges of returning home or taking another assignment abroad.

Understanding the Business Environment

- Discussion of the host country's history, economy and international relations as they affect the present-day business environment and society.
- Introduction to and discussion of business etiquette and communication styles that are generally considered appropriate in the host country.

Handling Job Role and Responsibilities

- Development of a work action plan.
- Exploration of the role and responsibilities of the working expat, focusing on ways in which the host country culture might influence the expectations that local colleagues might have for the expat's performance in specific situations.
- Discussion of how the working expat might perform the job role, manage job responsibilities, and meet business objectives in culturally appropriate ways.

Learning the Language

- For expats who are new to the language of the host country: Practice of basic courtesy phrases and introduction to the structure and pronunciation.

- For expats who will be using their own native language as their primary language of communication in the host country: Discussion of guidelines on how to modify their use of their native language to facilitate communication with people of the host country who speak the language.
- For expats who are quite fluent in the language of the host country: Practice in pronunciation and intonation of the host country language.

Focus on Predeparture Training: Components of Advanced Training

Longer, more advanced predeparture training should include all of the components of basic predeparture training. In addition, it should reinforce knowledge acquisition, provide a thorough discussion of business issues and encourage skill building. Advanced training might also include activities that expose participants to aspects of the host culture, such as dining at a restaurant that serves the food of the host culture.

The content and pace of the training are carefully tailored to meet the needs and interests of the participants, and trainers sometimes act in a consulting role. Components of advanced training usually include some or all of the following:

Living in the Host Country

- Guidance in developing plans to achieve personal objectives for the international assignment.
- Discussion with expats concerning strategies for developing social and business contacts inside and outside the company.

Communicating across Cultures

- Practice of skills for managing daily interactions with people in the host country (such as landlords, utility company representatives, repairmen, shopkeepers, or domestic workers) by roleplaying those interactions.

Understanding the Business Environment

- Discussion of industry-specific business practices, systems, competitor activity, and other relevant business-related topics.
- Presentation of information about other countries in the region (if the working expat will have regional job responsibilities).

Handling Job Role and Responsibilities

This portion of the training should be carefully tailored to the specific needs of the working expat. It should be designed with full consideration of the working expat's specific job responsibilities and objectives, prior international experience, and level of understanding of the host country culture and business environment.

- Development of a plan for achieving professional objectives.
- Exploration of cultural differences in managerial and technical functions such as: supervising; evaluating; training and coaching subordinates; receiving training; goal setting; persuading; making presentations; facilitating meetings; building and managing multicultural teams; managing and resolving conflict; as well as building relationships and negotiating with customers, vendors, government officials and joint venture partners.
- Application of knowledge of the host culture and principles of cross-cultural interaction in case study situations.
- Practice in applying understanding of the host culture and the principles of cross-cultural interaction to interacting with people of the host country in simulated business situations. (Trainers should provide participants with feedback from the perspective of the host culture, and work with participants to develop guidelines and strategies for handling similar real-life situations in the future.)
- Discussion of specific business issues facing the working expat and the company in the host country.

Learning the Language

- For expats who are new to the language of the host country: Development of basic communication skills.
- For expats who will be using their own native language as their primary language of communication in the host country: Practice in modifying their use of their native language to facilitate communication with people of the host country who speak the language.
- For expats who are quite fluent in the language of the host country: Practice to increase language fluency in social and business situations.

Focus on Predeparture Training: Criteria for Program Evaluation

The quality of predeparture training programs offered by service providers varies greatly. Significant criteria for evaluating the quality of predeparture programs appear in the following table:

Criteria for Predeparture Training Program Evaluation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training design is based on a comprehensive assessment of participants' needs and interests. • Information presented is accurate, current, practical and relevant. • Information presented builds on what participants already know. • Trainers "paint a realistic picture". In other words, they include both the pleasures and the challenges of living and working in the host country. • Training includes a focus on the working expat's specific role and job functions. • Trainers are knowledgeable, have good presentation skills, and manage time well. • Training is interactive, participative, and experiential, with attention paid to the needs and requests of participants. • Trainers demonstrate ways to apply intercultural understanding and skills to a variety of situations. • Trainers encourage participants to apply knowledge and experience in analyzing situations they have encountered or in preparing for situations that they might encounter in the future. • Training design goes beyond providing information and includes skill practice. • Training introduces tools to assist participants in learning, reflecting, and continuing to build knowledge after the training. • Trainers model appropriate cross-cultural interaction and conflict resolution skills among themselves and with participants.

Focus on Predeparture Training: Timing

Predeparture training is most effective when it is delivered no more than six weeks and no less than one week prior to the expats' scheduled departure for the host country. Preferably, training should be delivered after the working expat has gained a clear understanding of the new job and after the working expat, and possibly the family, have had at least one visit to the host country.

When training is delivered too far in advance of departure, participants tend to have less interest in the training and tend to forget more of what they have learned. If training

occurs before participants have had any personal exposure to the host country, then they may not be aware of what they need to know and may have difficulty participating actively in the training. Finally, if the working expat does not yet have a clear idea of the job description and responsibilities of the international assignment, then trainers cannot tailor the business components of the training to the working expat's specific business needs.

When training is delivered too close to the departure date, expats are usually overwhelmed with all the logistical details of their relocation and therefore cannot concentrate on the training.

By scheduling training delivery at an appropriate time, companies can achieve a greater return on their investment.

Focus on Predeparture Training: Qualifications of Trainers/Consultants

Few companies have professional intercultural trainers or consultants on staff to provide expat support services; most contract with external organizations that are experienced in providing intercultural training and consulting services to multinational companies.

Predeparture training is best done by a team of trainers that includes at least one person who shares the culture of the participants and at least one person from the host country. This team is sometimes supplemented by people who have expertise in specific topics that are of interest to the participants, by specialists in expat counseling, or by expats who have recently returned home from assignments in the host country.

Each member of the training team should have the minimum qualifications mentioned in the following table:

Qualifications of Trainers/Consultants

- In-depth, up-to-date knowledge of the host country culture(s)
- Living experience in the host country (minimum six months; optimally at least two years)
- Work experience in the host country (minimum six months; optimally at least two years; preferably in business or commerce rather than academia or government)
- Familiarity with best practices of multinational organizations in the host country
- Ability to discuss strategies for handling actual and hypothetical business issues
- A positive attitude toward the host country and its people
- Interest in guiding participants to increase their familiarity with the host culture
- Experience living as an adult in a culture other than one's own for at least one year
- Knowledge of and demonstrated skill in applying intercultural communication principles
- Knowledge of the home country culture of the participants
- Familiarity with educational and adult learning principles and styles
- Well-developed training skills (both in content delivery and process facilitation)
- Ability to deliver training that is interactive and flexible in design
- Ability to address questions and situations by guiding participants to diagnose them, apply knowledge to them, formulate interpretations or courses of action, and test those interpretations and courses of action
- Ability to give participants feedback on personal communication styles and behavior, and to guide participants in modifying these styles as necessary
- Ability to effectively handle the extreme emotions that participants sometimes express before and during the international assignment
- Ability to model appropriate intercultural interaction
- Functional fluency in the language in which the training will be delivered and functional fluency in a language of the host country
- Professional qualifications in language teaching (if language training will be a substantial component of the program)

It should be noted that while in-house staff, such as returned expats or human resources personnel, can be valuable resources to expats during various phases of international assignments, they should be the primary facilitators of predeparture training only if they meet the criteria listed above for professional intercultural trainers.

Supporting Employees on International Assignments: Outline of Services

The three services mentioned in this chapter are just some of services that companies can offer to support employees and their families before, during, and after international assignments. These and other important support services are outlined in the following table in rough chronological order:

Outline of Expat Support Services [following page]

1. Interview and selection processes that assist employees in deciding whether or not they want to (or are ready to) accept international assignments
2. Orientation to the job role and objectives of the new assignment
3. A pre-assignment site visit ("look-see" trip) to the host country to choose housing, meet work colleagues, visit schools, etc.
4. Predeparture training and language training to facilitate adjustment
5. Onsite, post-arrival relocation assistance to facilitate the "settling-in" process in the host country
6. On-going language training to build fluency in a host country language
7. Onsite consulting to address specific business, performance, team, personal and family issues that arise during the assignment
8. Cross-cultural team building training for international and local staff to facilitate day-to-day communication and achievement of work goals
9. Assessment of on-the-job effectiveness (performance monitoring) and performance coaching
10. A process for matching expats to new assignments and for reintegrating them into the home country organization or orienting them to another international location
11. Training to facilitate repatriation to the home country or adjustment to a new international assignment
12. Relocation assistance to facilitate the "settling-in" process back home or in a new country
13. Debriefing of expats regarding the challenges of and lessons learned during the international assignment

Conclusion

In order to function successfully in a host country, expats should understand the local culture and business practices. They should be willing and able to modify their behavior when necessary in order to convey the messages they intend to convey, and they should develop understanding and awareness in order to accurately interpret and appropriately act on the messages they receive. In order to function successfully back home after an international assignment, they must be willing and able to adapt once again. Predeparture training, onsite consulting and repatriation training can assist expats in accomplishing the above and increase their productivity and satisfaction with their life and work.

By providing an array of support services, including predeparture training, onsite consulting, and repatriation training for expats going to and coming from China, companies can maximize their investments in these international assignments and increase the likelihood of achieving business objectives.

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