

Personal and Family Aspects of Short-Term Assignments

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Unaccompanied short-term assignments and extended business travel are increasing in frequency, in the face of high expatriate costs, security issues, and family resistance to moving. In *Voices From the Road: The Personal and Family Side of International Short-Term Assignments*,¹ employees reported more positive work and personal outcomes when they felt better-supported financially and had clear and helpful human resources policies, more family support services, more choice about their assignments, when they were less worried about their families and the impact of their absence, and when there were more benefits to the assignment. Here is a sample of advice offered by participants to employers:

Be clear about the terms of the assignment:

- There should be transparency on the type of work we would be doing and rules and regulations. We should be fully informed about the allowances we would get before we make a decision.
- Give us as much information about the role as possible, including an accurate estimate on the length of the project.

Offer appealing financial rewards to expatriates:

- Don't penny pinch.
- Don't employ policies that make it less beneficial the longer the assignment lasts.
- Be more sensitive and not so calculating in terms of costs.
- The economic benefits should be proportional to the personal sacrifice made by leaving family and friends.

¹ A research report from The Interchange Institute, sponsored by Full Circle International Relocations, Inc. (2008).

Do not force an employee into taking such an assignment:

- Ask our opinion and don't hold it against us if we don't accept it.
- At least, give us the choice.
- Consider extensions a serious decision. Give us time to think about it.
- Ask people what they want to do and respect their choice, so you create real commitment.

Offer flexibility in policies:

- Give the possibility of having a degree of control over time spent away from the family.
- Allow flexible working arrangements (telecommuting) for part of the assignment.

Offer practical assistance and support for the employee:

- Don't just dump people on assignment; actively help the individual.
- Be more supportive and consistent in what is expected and what the company can and cannot provide.
- Provide more administrative assistance.

Make employees' family and personal welfare part of your concern:

- Involve the partner, discuss issues with both, and try to find the right balance, by fulfilling even little requests. Simply listening and showing interest and willingness to find a solution, even if you can't do everything you wish to help, can be enough.
- Make it obligatory for the family to take a pre-decision assignment evaluation so that all members align their expectations and concerns, and, at the same time, improve family communications and expectations. Companies and assignees will benefit from having a more stable family relationship.

Offer the option for the family to accompany the employee:

- If the spouse can accompany the employee for a moderate increase in total expenses, strong consideration should be made to encourage the spouse to go along. It makes the employee more effective and durable for the assignment.

Maintain close communication throughout the assignment:

- Agree on regular updates and progress meetings.
- Contact the employee regularly by phone to ask about concerns, issues, and feelings.
- Invite them to the home office for a chat every quarter.

Arrange for better work-life/family balance:

- Increase frequency of flights home; allow family to fly-in or have fly-out benefits to catch up with family matters and life.
- Pay close attention to their work-life balance (if they are out of town four days a week, allow them the fifth day with their families).

Help the employee integrate into the host country:

- Provide cultural orientation after we reach the country because we are not really focused before we depart.
- Provide some social connection in the host country.

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