

# Selection and Global Talent Management

Before building a bridge, the stresses on every beam and bolt must be engineered carefully.

The consequences of not doing so can be catastrophic. In similar fashion, say Gaydos and Kozloff, applying a disciplined selection process for international assignments is a way of engineering the likelihood of success for employees and their families.

BY ED GAYDOS, PH.D., AND BARRY KOZLOFF

In 1980, our company began a field research project with McDonnell Douglas Corporation, St. Louis; AT&T (then SBC); and the High Commission for Development of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The research adopted a statistical method then in use by the U.S. Department of Defense for preventing missile launch catastrophes. The same statistical methodology was applied to the task of preventing international assignment failures.

The factors associated with failure in international assignments fell into three general categories: cultural flexibility, family conditions, and level of company support. Use of these factors to screen for international assignments proved to be highly effective over the years. However, it also became apparent that more was needed if employers were to get the most from their international assignments. The successful international assignment needed to be part of a global talent development system.



## The Success Factors

First, it is important to understand a fundamental truth. Prior international experience and technical knowledge are not predictors of success. Focus on experience and knowledge too often deflects attention away from what is vastly more important.

**Cultural flexibility.** This includes tolerance for other cultures, inquisitiveness, adaptability, and the quiet maturity to deal with the unexpected. Underlying these are the deeper qualities of honesty, care for others, and social sensitivity. The individual who is self-centered, know-it-all, and ethically marginal may have a glittering résumé but is less likely to succeed in an international assignment. An international assignment throws much at the individual that is new, complex, demanding, and uncertain. It is not technical knowledge that wins the day, but judgment and adaptability. These qualities are equally important in an accompanying spouse. Selection, therefore, must pay equal attention to the spouse, who too often is viewed as a minor detail in the assignment process.

**Family issues.** These include a reluctant spouse, special education needs of children, caring for aging parents, and medical issues. One very bright red flag is the spouse or family that is not accompanying the employee on the assignment. This often contributes to both failed assignments and failed marriages. There always is the temptation to underestimate the difficulty of dealing with family issues in another country. Cut off from familiar surroundings, small issues often can balloon into crises.

The important thing is to make arrangements before the assignment, such as finding a special school for a child and not waiting until landing

in-country.

**Company support.** This includes management of the physical move; having an in-country support network; and being responsive to housing, education, and medical needs as they arise. While evaluating the employee and spouse for international assignment, the company also must evaluate itself. It must ask itself the question, “do we have in place the support mechanisms to deal quickly with problems as they arise?”

Screening for all these factors is worth the effort. “I have to select hard to manage easy,” said Michael Haak, vice president of engineering at Caterpillar’s Solar Turbines Division in San Diego, CA, and the company’s former managing director—EMEA. “Whether I’m hiring a local for a regional services manager’s job in Brussels, recruiting a sales manager in London, hiring a graduate electrical engineer in Houston, or sending an Australian employee to Jakarta, selection is the best way to get them, grow them, and keep them.”

## Tools and Processes

We developed a progression of tools and processes based on the following success factors:

**Family discussion guide.** This is a self-selection tool. It provides a structure for family members to discuss all the important issues they are likely to encounter in an international assignment. When large numbers of employees are given the opportunity to consider an international assignment, it is advisable to make a self-screening tool such as this a mandatory first step.

Well over half will decide on their own that an international assignment is not for them at this time. The fam-

ily discussion guide can be used in privacy and places the initial decision in the hands of the employee. It has the added advantage of highlighting potential issues should the employee and family decide to remain under consideration for an international assignment.

**Formal assessment of the family.** This is a full day of interviewing. It includes the employee, spouse, and often older children. The interview process is relaxed and informal. There are no surprises or hidden agendas. There is a clear focus on the specific factors associated with success in international assignments. When the individuals already have completed the family discussion guide, the conversation flows naturally onto the proper topics.

Typical of comments from people participating in a daylong assessment/counseling session:

A manager of a large oil and gas company had this insight after the full-day assessment. “After the assessment I decided I cannot take the assignment. I have put my two daughters through one divorce already. If I take the assignment in Spain, I will be putting them through another. I told the company I am not ready for an assignment now.”

**In-country counseling and follow-up.** No selection method can predict perfectly the kinds of issues that will arise on assignment. A telephone call every few weeks can uncover and address small issues before they grow into big issues.

The project manager of a major construction company said, “The whole assessment and follow-up process has been particularly helpful to me since my mother was killed in a car accident [a week before the

assessment]. I have been relieved to know there is a trained counselor following up with me to monitor for any signs of depression."

**Trends and issues report to management.**

During the course of several international assignments it is inevitable that certain trends and common issues begin to emerge. These represent an ideal learning opportunity for the corporation.

For example, a large petrochemical company discovered that its people based in Thailand wanted an HR contact who really knew the country. Their HR representative was based in China, and they perceived her as being too far away and disconnected.

**Global talent management.** Sending employees and their families on international assignments does

not in itself contribute to global talent management. Quite the opposite often is the case. When a high-potential employee, for example, returns after a three-year international assignment and is given a series of lesser domestic jobs, the result can be global talent deterioration. Other high-potential employees will observe keenly that an international assignment is a career killer. The high potential employee will seek employment elsewhere. The organization will fail to take advantage of the special knowledge and business acumen the international assignment produced in the individual.

**Repatriation.** The single most important aspect of global talent management is not the international assignment itself, but what happens to the individual after the assignment.

Planning for the individual's next job should be a part of the initial international assignment decision. This is a tall order for most companies because it requires an extraordinary commitment to the individual. It places a heavier burden on management to select individuals for international assignment who have broad potential for the business. And it reinforces the principle that flexibility, judgment, and maturity are the key criteria for international assignment.

## The Role of Selection

The selection assessment report serves to support a simple yes/no decision regarding the international assignment. When used as an element in global





talent management the assessment does not then go into a dark drawer, but remains in the light of day and becomes a living component of the talent management process.

What is the connective tissue between selection tools and the company's talent management practices?

- The company determines the initial pool for international assignment. The family discussion guide then helps in the first screening decision.

- The one-day assessment highlights issues that the individual and family will encounter in the assignment.

- The one-day assessment provides a framework and a checklist for familiarization visits.

- In-country counseling and follow-

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up by selection professionals alerts company personnel who support families on international assignment.

- In-country counseling and follow-up surfaces repatriation issues in time to be addressed by company personnel.

- The trends and issues report helps management establish corporate policies and criteria.

It is this working together of selection and company practices that constitute a true global talent management system. ■

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