

## Preparation and Reintegration Ensuring a Successful International Assignment

By **Caterina Cregor Blitzer**

*(Editor's Note: First of a three-part series)*

Indiana businesses export more than first-rate products to nations around the globe. Our state also exports top-quality human talent. At any given time, up to 1,000 Indiana workers are engaged in international assignments. Employees are stationed in very modern and highly developed locations, as well as in third-world nations and rural, developing countries.

While the opportunities for professional development and quality-of-life experiences are tremendous, international assignments also present significant challenges and risks that may impact an employee's satisfaction, productivity and retention. Research conducted by Anne P. Copeland, Ph.D., founder and executive director of The Interchange Institute, Copland Corporation indicates that the cost of a failed international assignment is approximately three to four times the cost of the employee's base salary.

The International Center of Indianapolis (ICI), a non-profit organization serving the community since 1973, is among the groups providing Indiana companies both large and small with services to assist their international employees in achieving a successful international assignment. Both pre- and post-departure services are available. With the old saying, "If mama's not happy, no one is happy," certainly ringing true in the case of an international assignment, it is important to work with not only the employee but also family members to ease the transition to a new environment.

### Setting the stage

While initial concerns may focus on the practicalities of learning a new language, securing accommodations and transportation, a move to a new culture also presents significant mental and emotional challenges. It is important to take a holistic approach to integrating an assignee and his/her family into a new environment.

**A repatriation program should assist participants with integrating their international experiences and help them gain insights that will ease their return to the workplace and community.**

The process of preparing for an international assignment begins well before the employee departs. One successful method is to take the employee and any family members on a virtual tour of the destination, including a country and cultural overview. During this portion of the training, the assignee learns about cultural traditions such as holidays observed,

popular foods, climatic details and the economy.

Specific tips on meeting the challenges associated with a new culture are also covered, along with resources an employee can consult upon arrival in the new country. The goal of this virtual immersion program is to minimize the surprise factor associated with an international move.

The ICI staff have each participated in an international experience and each team member is multi-lingual, providing international assignees with access to specific services such as language tutoring and housing information, or sometimes just a helpful "ear" that has been through the process.



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### Coming home

The process of repatriating back to the U.S. from an international assignment can also be challenging for employees, spouses and children. A repatriation program should assist participants with integrating their international experiences and help them gain insights that will ease their return to the workplace and community. The program focuses on analyzing the impact of challenges overcome in the new environment, how to apply new knowledge, skills and insights gained both professionally and personally during the international assignment and tips on managing the return home.

Specific coaching is also provided to the repatriating employee to allow him or her to more effectively return to the U.S. workplace. An employee that has completed an international assignment is likely to have developed skills and experience that make him or her even more coveted by other organizations, presenting opportunities for the employee to be recruited by other firms.

Whether setting sail for an international assignment or addressing re-entry into the U.S. workplace after such an assignment, organizations cannot assume the tremendous challenges and learning opportunities associated with an international assignment will be transparent. Education, coaching and good old fashioned support can go a long way toward maximizing the rewards of an international assignment for both the employer and employee.

#### INFORMATION LINK

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