

EXPATRIATE

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Repatriation The Expatriate Challenge

If you think going back home is easy, be prepared for the unexpected because everything— including you—has changed.

Where Are Expatriates Going

The Middle East is losing ground, while the Far East and Latin America are on the rise, along with a growing number of “inpatriates” to North America.

Expatriate Observer seeks the submission of articles about life abroad and letters to the editor. If you have information or an opinion you want to express, please address it to

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Repatriation: The Expatriate Challenge

Lisa B. Berg

The word comes from headquarters that the assignment is over. The employee and his or her family will soon be returning home. Whether they have been overseas one year or 20, in one country or several, they are about to close a chapter of their lives and begin a new one. The quandary of repatriation—the difficulty in returning “home”—is experienced by people of all nationalities and ages. Most probably, the employee and his or her family have grown in many ways. They have had many experiences that have enriched their lives. Part of their job in repatriation will be to learn how to hold on to and use those experiences; the other part will be to learn to readjust to life back in their home country.

Anticipation and expectations for a smooth and joyful reentry are normal. After all, they think, “We’re going home. What could be so difficult?”

Stress at the time of reentry into one’s home country is a reality and creates unexpected difficulties. The good news is that, after some time, the employee and his or her family will adjust, and the overseas experience will be placed in proper perspective. With closure on the international experience and clear expectations for the future, the stress of “reentry shock” can be greatly reduced.

Reentry shock is a state of heightened stress and anxiety that occurs during the transition to the home culture. Returnees need to be realistic and know that stress related to “coming home” is a reality and is perfectly normal. In addition, their colleagues in the office

need to recognize and understand the personal and professional difficulties that the repatriating family is experiencing. Allowing for this process to occur and providing support at this time will significantly ease the adjustment.

Common Symptoms of Reentry Shock

- Unrealistic expectations
- Inability to concentrate
- Feeling alienated in one's own country
- Confusion as to how much and with whom to share experiences
- Depression: a sense of loss and separation
- Difficulty in performing at maximum level
- Feeling overwhelmed

Significant numbers of employees returning from an overseas assignment leave their companies within one year of returning. This fact alone should alert today's global companies that the needs of their returning employees are not being met.

Naturally, there are challenges to repatriation for all involved—the returnee, his or her family, and the company. But there are also many ways in which all parties can ease some of the inevitable difficulties of an expatriate returning to his or her home country.

When moving overseas, people expect things to be different. They know that they must make an effort to “fit in” to function comfortably in the new environment. In coming

“home,” however, returnees do not usually envision such difficulties. Expectations that they will fit right back in when returning “home” are not usually accurate.

Repatriation is much more difficult precisely because of false expectations. The returnee believes that he or she will be able to “fit back in” to all the systems that made life so comfortable before leaving the home country. Friends, family, and colleagues also have similar unrealistic expectations and believe that the returnee must be happy to be back home. However, as shown below, many changes have occurred that make “fitting back in” very difficult.

Making a successful adjustment is the responsibility of both the returnee and the company. To make the move back home a success, today's returning international family and company must anticipate and be ready to address the following issues

- Professional Expectations
- Personal Change
- Changes in Lifestyle
- Environmental Change
- Children and Family Issues

An American ▶
returning after
six years in
Japan and Korea.

An American ▶
returning after
five years in
the Netherlands.



Often, the returning employee is given the same job he or she had prior to the overseas assignment or a job that focuses solely on domestic matters, if a position is even available at all.

PROFESSIONAL EXPECTATIONS

"After returning from overseas, my colleagues rarely sought out specific insights from my experience. Executives in particular seemed 'not to care.' Although you think you have demonstrated adaptability and flexibility in moving and working overseas, those skills do not seem to be in great demand."

"Most people I met on international assignments, including myself, felt it was an unparalleled professional growth experience; yet, the experience was rarely utilized by the company upon return. More likely than not, the return assignment had more to do with what slots were available, and those were domestically focused. As a result, the newly acquired professional skills had little positive effect on career enhancement. When people ask me about taking an international assignment, I tell them that it is a fantastic, often difficult, professional learning experience. I encourage them to take the risk, but not to count on it enhancing their promotability. It might have the opposite effect!"

Employees who accept overseas assignments generally have high expectations of professional growth during the years abroad. These employees are often asked to be

pioneers in setting up offices in new locations and creating profitable businesses in an environment where styles of management and communication, values, and even the definition of what makes a company successful may vary greatly from those back home. These employees encounter many new challenges during their overseas assignment, and expect their expertise and new skills to be appreciated and rewarded upon return.

Some employees are promoted into jobs with increased responsibilities upon returning home. Some are even assigned jobs that utilize their international experiences. The majority are not, however. Often, the returning employee is given the same job he or she had prior to the overseas assignment or a job that focuses solely on domestic matters, if a position is even available at all. Too often, a returnee is brought back without any identified job assignment.

Upon return to the home office, there is often no recognition of work well done. Few people ask about the experience, and even fewer value the skills that the employee has learned. Returning employees are expected to perform at peak levels immediately, as if they had been on an extended business trip—not on a long-term assignment living and working in another culture.

It takes time for the returning employee to understand just how much he or she has learned during

the overseas assignment. In most cases, the returning employee has acquired important new skills that can provide significant value to the company. One of the challenges of repatriation for the returnee and the company is to maximize that added value.

Prime Considerations for Repatriation Process

Employees

- Don't expect 100 percent performance immediately. Give yourself time to adjust.
- Network. Be your own best advocate.
- Compile an inventory of the new skills developed while working overseas. For example, many employees on overseas assignment acquire new managerial, communications, and project management skills.
- Ask for what you need.
- Volunteer for task forces that utilize the skills you learned overseas, as well as your international experience.

Companies

- Appoint a sponsor or mentor throughout the assignment to keep the employee abreast of corporate changes and professional opportunities.
- Allow sufficient time for the employee to plan his or her departure, transfer responsibilities, and say the proper good-byes.
- Find a position for the returning expatriate that utilizes his or her newly expanded set of skills.
- Keep business trips to a minimum for the first few months back. This will allow the employee to adjust to the new working environment.
- Show interest in the employee's experiences.

PERSONAL CHANGE

"I never stopped being an American when I was overseas, but the Dutch culture affected me tremendously. Social values in the Netherlands revolve around the importance of long-term relationships and maintaining a social fabric where there is a high level of tolerance and support for all. The difficulty of returning home to the United States, for me, has been to find that balance again, on my own, while I am surrounded by people who are pursuing the 'American dream' of individual freedom and material advancement."

◀ An American returning after 13 years in the Netherlands.

A person moving to another culture experiences many new and different customs and social values. At first, these seem interesting, although perhaps bewildering. As time passes, however, many of these customs and values are incorporated into that person's own being. Indeed, often without the awareness of the individual, profound shifts occur in the core of his or her being.

For example, an assertive American expatriate in Japan may soon learn that a more circular, group-oriented way of working with colleagues will yield better, long-term results in Japan. Having thus incorporated this different approach into his or her management

The goal of expatriates must be to integrate their life experiences and the positive aspects of each culture into a new persona. Many people find they build a protective wall around themselves and bury the whole overseas experience.

style, the returning employee may find that the assertive, individualized way of managing expected upon return to the home office no longer comes naturally. A questioning of “why isn’t this working anymore?” and “what’s the right way to behave?” is not uncommon.

One typical reaction of returning expatriates is to alienate themselves from their home-country nationals and find fault with their home country itself. They let others know how much better it was “back there.” Bashing of the home country is not uncommon.

It is difficult to find a balance and feeling of belonging at “home.” Some people do not want to hear about international experiences. It is difficult to know what to share and how to relate to others. The goal of expatriates must be to integrate their life experiences and the positive aspects of each culture into a new persona. Many people find they build a protective wall around themselves and bury the whole overseas experience. Once employees have lived overseas, they are never the same persons. Expatriates are broadened in ways they may not even realize.

CHANGE IN LIFESTYLE

“Coming back to New Jersey after two years in India proved to be much more difficult than I had anticipated. After a few months in my old ‘home’ I found myself missing the stimulation and tumult of life in New Delhi. My senses were no longer assaulted by smells and sights. The New Jersey suburbs seemed dull, bland, and quite boring. I was no longer hosting dinner parties two or three times a week. Besides, I no longer had the household help to do so. In India, I experienced a life that could not be repeated anywhere else, the good and the bad! To my surprise, I missed it very much!”

◀ An American returning after two years in India.

Returning Adults

- Say “good-bye” to anyone or anything that has been important to you and your family while living overseas. Proper leave-taking will help put the overseas experience into perspective and allow you to be more open to new experiences.
- Prepare a summary of your overseas experiences which is limited to three or four sentences. This may be all that people are ready to hear about.
- Have patience. Remember, you are the one who has changed.
- Volunteer your time and talents to a group having some relationship to your overseas experience.
- Be careful about degrading your home country. Express your opinions without anger. You will be better received.
- Don’t expect 100 percent performance immediately at home. Give yourself time to readjust.

There is no question that living overseas means a lifestyle of increased status and advantages for many people. Typically, the financial incentives for uprooting a family and taking on increased responsibility allow for a higher standard of living, household help, and frequent, interesting vacations.

There is a sense of being “special” abroad. Walking along the streets, buying food or visiting new places of interest are daily experiences out of the ordinary that remind the foreigner on some level that this really is not like back home. Yet, after some time, these special experiences actually become part of home. Leaving thus creates a certain sense of loss. It takes some time for the home country to feel like home again. During the first months back, a family can feel very lonely and confused.

Some people find that returning to a familiar location is helpful; yet others prefer moving to an area where there are diversity of cultures and people with international experience to whom they can relate. Giving up an interesting lifestyle and returning to a location with little stimulation can be difficult. There are times when the whole family may feel quite different than other people: more worldly and interested in different experiences. Most people find their niche and a new comfort level in time. For some, this is never possible. They keep on moving in order to find a stimulating environment that they can call home.

Adjustment to Home

Returning Adults

- Reach out to other returned expatriates who understand your experiences. Join an international club.
- Try to schedule a relaxing trip while your shipment is in transit. Use this time to talk with your family about the positive and negative aspects of your life overseas and expectations for how your life will change back home.
- Be grateful for your enriching experiences and know that most people do not have such opportunities.

Companies

- Offer repatriation training to facilitate adjustment.
- Provide financial counseling to assist the employee in understanding the issues surrounding a reduced income and increased personal expenses.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES

“I was really looking forward to returning to Australia and being able to return to my nursing profession that had always given me a comfortable feeling. Easier said than done! I had to take a three-month refresher course. Finding the course was a problem because the government was withdrawing funds. So here I was, settling back into a country I didn’t know anymore and returning to school. It was like moving to another country. It should have been familiar, but it wasn’t. There was no relocation support from my husband’s employer. It was the hardest move I ever made.”

◀ An Australian returning after 20 years in Canada and Asia.

Not only has the returning expatriate changed, but also the environment back home has not frozen in time either. Even with the benefit of “home leave” visits, changes to the environment usually go unnoticed.

A changed economy. New roads and stores. New TV shows and movie stars. Advanced technologies, reorganizations, and reengineering. The list goes on, and it is overwhelming. Not only has the returning expatriate changed, but also the environment back home has not frozen in time either. Even with the benefit of “home leave” visits, changes to the environment usually go unnoticed. The incongruity of these new parts of the home country add to the stress and feelings of being out of place.

For example, within the last decade, large discount warehouse grocery stores have become popular in the United States. A returning American expecting to shop in the neighborhood grocery store or supermarket—as he or she did before moving overseas—could well find shopping in warehouse supermarkets extremely overwhelming. One woman said that the most surprising part of repatriation was relearning how to shop in her own country!

There are some cases when the environmental changes are quite positive. For example, a family with young children may welcome open spaces to play and sports activities that were not available while living overseas. Someone moving from a highly polluted area will find the fresh air easy to get used to. Certainly not all aspects of returning home are negative ones.

Adapting to the Home Environment

Returning Adults

- Do your homework before you return. Research the workplace and neighborhood to which you are moving. Although this may be a move “home,” you still need to have realistic expectations.
- When you feel overwhelmed, find a calming activity just for you.
- Remember, you will get used to this “new” environment, just as you adjusted overseas.

CHILDREN AND FAMILY ISSUES

“Living abroad was a wonderful experience for us all. I know we’ve grown closer as a family, and our lives have been greatly enriched. I remember it was especially hard for the children to get used to being with friends who had limited experiences and little knowledge about the world. They had so much to share, but they hesitated because they didn’t want to stand out as being different.”

◀ An American returning after six years in Japan and Singapore.

For many families, time spent overseas away from other support systems provided an opportunity for the immediate family members to become quite close. They depended on each other for support and had many new experiences together. Quality time was more readily available when there were household help and family vacations. Upon their return, time together seems more difficult to find.

In addition, children who have lived overseas are often different from their peers. They have added a new dimension to their lives to which few of their peers can relate. They often have a hard time establishing new friendships. They may need to adjust to different school pressures. They have to learn—perhaps for the first time—what is popular in their home culture.

Children returning to their home country often do not fully identify with either the home country or the foreign country in which they lived. Rather, they are part of what Ruth Hill Useem, a cross-cultural expert, calls the “third culture.” The self-identity needs of “Third Culture Kids” or “TCKs” will be stronger than those of expatriate adults because of the formative nature of childhood: At a time when these children are still developing their sense of self, they are also integrating into a new culture. The circumstances surrounding a child at this time will have a major impact on the process of identity formation.

Positive Attributes of “Third Culture Kids”

- Independence
- Willing and open to experience change
- Accustomed to different kinds of relationships
- Closer family unit
- Acceptance of “other,” less likely to judge
- Deeper caring and understanding of the world
- Knowledge of second language
- Quality education

TCKs can return, fit in, and still appreciate their uniqueness. A proper youth reentry program can facilitate this process. Although TCKs may still exhibit the natural reactions of loss and frustration, the majority of children see the move as an overall positive experience in retrospect.

Socializing with people who have had similar experiences helps the adjustment of both children and adult repatriates. Two people who relocate to two different countries share a camaraderie that will strengthen their sense of belonging to this third culture. For this reason, many adults find comfort in joining international clubs, such as FAWCO (The Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas) or the International Friendship Club (see page 9) where people like themselves gather to socialize and support each other.

POSITIVE REENTRY EXPERIENCE

Repatriation presents significant challenges. The first hurdle, however, is for the returnee and the company to understand that adjustment difficulties in returning home are not at all uncommon.

Many assignees find that dealing with reentry shock is the most significant challenge of the entire international expatriate experience. As discussed above, a myriad of professional, personal, and environmental changes have occurred during the overseas

Companies can also do much to facilitate a positive reentry experience for their returning employees. Providing a mentor during the overseas assignment and careful job placement upon return will assist the adjustment process.

assignment. Helping the returnee and his or her family to understand these changes will ease the adjustment to life in the home country and afford a more positive reentry experience.

Companies can also do much to facilitate a positive reentry experience for their returning employees. Providing a mentor during the overseas assignment and careful job placement upon return will assist the adjustment process. In addition, the returnee's participation in a professional reentry training program will help the returnee to clarify expectations, reflect on newly acquired skills, and develop strategies for a smoother repatriation. Paying attention to this stage of the

international assignment will foster a smoother adjustment and will allow management to obtain the benefits of the enhanced knowledge and added value of its repatriated employee.

Lisa Berg is a Cross-Cultural and Human Potential Consultant. To find out more about her services or to schedule her for your next conference, training or retreat, go to www.LisaBergConsulting.com

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For Further Reading

The Art of Coming Home. Craig Storti. Available from Intercultural Press, Inc., Yarmouth, ME, 1997. Call 207.846.5168.

Cross-Cultural Reentry: A Book of Readings. Clyde Austin, ed. Abilene Christian University, Abilene, TX, 1986.

Culture Shock! Successful Living Abroad: A Parent's Guide. Robin Pascoe. Times Books International, Singapore, 1993.

Global Assignments: Successfully Expatriating and Repatriating International Managers. J. Stewart Black, Hal N. Gregersen, and Mark E. Mendenhall. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 1992.

Easing a Child's Adjustment

Parents

- Share your own experiences, both difficult and positive.
- Deal with the grief and loss. Don't pretend it isn't there.
- Listen. Bedtime can be a time for children, and even adolescents, to express their concerns.
- Promote family time now. You cannot get it back.
- Value your child's relationships and encourage continued communications.
- Encourage transitional objects, such as yearbooks, souvenirs, etc.
- Create new rituals around holidays you celebrated abroad.
- Make time for your child to develop new friendships.

Children

- Realize that you have had special experiences. Hold on to these experiences. Learn how and where to share them.
- Ask your teachers when it would be appropriate to talk about your experiences living abroad.
- Be prepared for "silly" questions like: "So you lived in Japan. Do you like Chinese food?" People have not had the same experiences that you have had.
- Catch up on popular slang expressions, television, and fashion.
- Keep up with overseas friends via e-mail or other forms of communication.

Companies

- Make tutors available for children who need tutoring.
- Offer repatriation training specifically designed for children returning from an overseas assignment.

Repatriate Support Organizations

International Friendship Club www.ifcnjandny.com

An organization of Americans who have lived overseas and foreign nationals currently residing in the United States. The club's purpose is to foster cultural understanding, form social ties within the international community, and provide a place to share mutual experiences. Contact Lisa Berg for membership information.

FAWCO Alumni USA (The Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas) Telephone: 281.388.0834 or 915.729.4826

The Alumni Committee seeks to bridge the gap of reentry into the American way of life by keeping connections alive with other returned FAWCO women who have experienced expatriate life. Contact Mona Garcia for membership information.

