

# The Dark Side of Repatriation

By Cornelius Grove and  
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Once expatriates return home, they are often neglected. Giving them a helping hand will ensure a smooth transition.

**T**here's no excuse anymore for watching an asset for which you paid hundreds of thousands of dollars walk away from your company in disgust, taking with him or her a big chunk of the knowledge and skill you need to excel in the burgeoning, perplexing, hugely promising global marketplace.

By "asset," we refer to a former expatriate who returned home within the past two years. Oh, yes, just to add insult to injury, he or she might very well walk straight toward your competitor.

This is why repatriation is a "hard" business issue. It's about the economics of operating a business, about costs and benefits, about wringing strategic value from very expensive resources. Business policy-makers have ignored good repatriation practices because they've viewed them as "soft," feel-good stuff. Let's give them the benefit of the doubt, though, by admitting that most of the early research on repatriation, dating back more than 30 years, was carried out on missionaries and Peace Corps volunteers, and was hidden away in obscure journals.

Nowadays, though, there's no excuse for losing money through high repatriate turnover. Research-based information about repatriating business people is readily, repeatedly available in periodicals like this one, which company leaders actually read. The findings are consistent, too, pointing not only to the financial losses but also to the reme-

dies. *Hello out there. We know how to fix this. The fix isn't even expensive.*

The fix involves two parts. For one part, you're better off engaging an external consultant. For the other, it's do-it-yourself: You've simply got to upgrade your repatriation policies and procedures. An outstanding consultant, of course, can give you many practical ideas about these. Let's look at this second part first.

The turnover rate for recently returned expatriates is very high because, in a word, they are underappreciated. Nobody cares. Nobody helps. Oh, sure, you helped them get their furniture home and all that, but that's where your visible concern ended. So is it sympathy they want? Hand-holding? Not at all. They want respect.

Repats know darn well that they possess experience-honed competencies that you need to succeed in the global marketplace. They think you don't respect them because: 1) You don't try to learn from them; and 2) You don't give them a new job that puts their global competencies to good use. They can't understand your apparent lack of business logic, either. After all, you've already spent an outrageous sum of money so that they could develop those competencies during an overseas assignment.

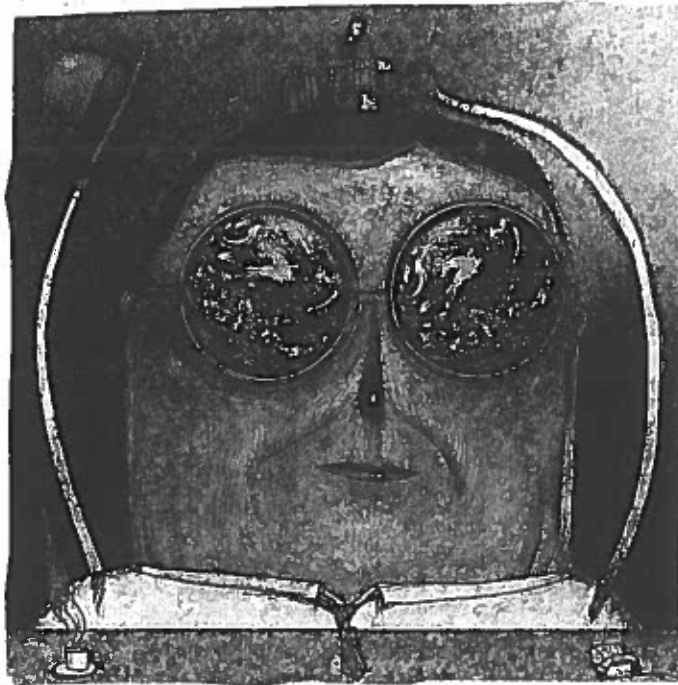
Clearly, then, the fix involves demonstrating respect for the competencies of your newly returned expatriates—and respect as well for your own

economic self-interest as an owner, major stockholder, or senior executive of the business. In terms of actual behaviors, demonstrating respect means that you've got to take several steps:

- Begin acting as though the money you spend on expatriate assignments is not only a cost but also an investment. You can easily spend more than a million dollars to put one family overseas for three years and bring them home again. (Did you ever actually add up all the figures?) You've probably got several expatriates out there, even dozens. You hire people to help you invest that much money wisely in securities, right? With business going determinedly global, your expatriates are an equally precious investment because they absorb invaluable global knowledge for you.

- And that fact leads directly to what we're going to christen the "Double Duration Rule." If you pay for an expatriate for three years, view his or her active investment pay-back period as being at least six years long: the three spent abroad, and the three years after he or she returns. You paid for that employee to get smart. So demonstrate by your behavior that you'll continue using those smarts for at least the same amount of time it took your employee to gain them. Using those smarts involves not only giving a globally oriented assignment to the returnee, but also finding ways to capture the returnee's knowledge and disseminate it for other employees' use.

- And that, in turn, suggests that you begin showing active, thoughtful concern about your expatriate investments from the beginning. . . meaning even before they go abroad! If you want maximum gain from your future expat's expensive learning experience, you and the employee need to plan ahead. You already give attention to the job he or she is going to accomplish abroad. Attend equally to the "intelligence" he or she needs to gather abroad and bring safely home for your company's private gain.



"The family isn't home until the last member unpacks his head."



### An Astronomical Turnover Rate

**B**usiness researchers have long known that recently repatriated employees have a high rate of turnover. A study by J.S. Black and H.B. Gregersen, "When Yankee Comes Home," in the 1991 *Journal of International Business Studies*, reported that about 29 percent of returnees leave within one year. This figure was confirmed by a 1996 Conference Board report, "Managing Expatriates' Return." The latter publication went on to reveal that up to 50 percent leave within the first three years of their return. For a review of recent research findings on business repatriation, see Craig Storti, "The Art of Coming Home," Intercultural Press, 1997, pages 3-6.

We said above that the expatriate "fix" involves two parts. We've been looking at the do-it-yourself part. (After all, a consultant can give you excellent advice, but can't act on your behalf.) Now

we'd like to turn to a consideration of what an external consultant can do on your behalf. . . and should do on your behalf instead of your doing it internally.

When the psychological and emotional aspects of returning home are under consideration, common sense is not a good guide to action. For most people, arriving back "home" from an expat assignment turns out to be more difficult than arriving in the "foreign" country where the assignment began. A contributing cause of repatriate turnover is this unexpected shock, which occurs because both soon-to-return expats and their supervisors easily assume that "coming home

is no problem." Not true.

Why? Because coming home is a cultural transition. When people go abroad, most expect some degree of culture shock, which they gradually overcome by adjusting to the new environment. In the process, values and mindsets change. For example, one might learn to place less value on U.S.-style rugged individualism. Back home, this might translate into strong dissatisfaction with so-called "teams" in which members jockey for political advantage and object loudly to pay based on group performance.

In short, the person who returns home is not exactly the person who went abroad. He or she sees the world through glasses with a different tint, and therefore makes different judgments about what is seen. To some extent, "home" has changed as well, with friends, colleagues and social trends having gradually evolved. So when expatriates return, they experience reverse culture shock. This preoccupies some so completely that they cannot attain their former levels of productivity for months. One reason it's so preoccupying is that it's unexpected; after all, they are coming home!

Family dynamics are transformed, usually in a troublesome way, according to Betsy Westendorf, a specialist in this field who has coached many returning families. "Expatriate spouses often



respond to the return by becoming over-involved in the employee's reaffiliation at the home office. In my experience, this only reinforces the employee's dissatisfaction with on-the-job problems," she says. "In addition, mothers often don't allow themselves to experience their own emotional reactions to the return until their children are settled. . .and that the children find it very difficult to feel settled until their parents feel settled."

This theory is reinforced by David Pollock, an expert on the children of expatriates (known in this field as "Third Culture Kids"). Pollock, who has spent several decades aiding expatriates returning from overseas assignment, claims that all family members must be accommodated for a returning expatriate to be effective. "The family isn't home until the last member unpacks his head," he adds.

Individuals and families returning home benefit greatly from supportive coaching. The company benefits as well because the psychological and emotional consequences of returning are ironed out much more quickly, leaving the employee free to become enthusiastic about the new job. Supportive coaching is best provided by outsiders with finely tuned coaching skills, according to Westendorf. "Such coaching quickly becomes intensely personal," she says. "A common outcome of a cultural transition to home is that people begin re-examining their life. After they have formed a bond of trust with the coach, returnees are able to open their hearts and minds and to mull over many of their deepest concerns. Most returnees just aren't comfortable baring their souls to a company or EAP counselor. Promises of strict confidentiality are simply more believable coming from an outside consultant."

State-of-the-art repatriation services involve not only this day-long post-return coaching session, but also direct coach-family telephone contact before the family departs from the overseas post. Information about the emotional and practical features of the return are provided during this phone call (and in mailed materials), enabling families to prepare for the biggest challenges of repatriation. Finally, the consultant contacts the family six weeks after the coaching session to check up on each member's progress. If the family needs help, the consultant discusses options with the company.

## Give Them A Mentor

It's common to talk about the value of a senior-level mentor (or career-coach or "godfather") in the home office for expatriates. The idea is to keep expats in the loop and to watch out for their interests. This is good advice. Let's make it even better by expanding this role to that of investment manager. We recommend making this senior person responsible not only for the expatriate's welfare, but also for the company's welfare in terms of ensuring that the large investment in the expatriate attains long-term benefits. One way in which the investment manager can discharge his or her responsibilities is to ask the expat, months prior to the return home, to submit a formal proposal to the company for making the best possible use of his or her newly acquired knowledge and skills.

duced responsibility or a make-work project is a major demotivator of returnees—and a frequent problem since expats often manage operations for a very large territory or plant while they're abroad.

3) Celebrate the expat's return: airport greeting, welcome-home party, and introductions to new colleagues. Thank the family for spending time away from home on behalf of the company.

4) Do not expect the new returnee to work at 100 percent effort and efficiency for the month or so that it takes to get the family resettled and reacclimated.

5) Save part of the normal pay or bonus for the expat's return. This is a time of unexpected financial demands; he or she will appreciate your forethought.

6) Finally, in this age of concern about diversity in the U.S. domestic workforce, remember this: Returned expats have had firsthand experience understanding different mind-sets and perspectives—as well as languages—and



We'd like to close with a compendium of good ideas in addition to the ones we have already discussed.

1) When an expatriate has home leave, bring him or her into the home office for meetings and even short-term projects. This helps avoid the "out of sight, out of mind" syndrome, which (as is often observed) has a decidedly chilling effect on careers.

2) Avoid bringing the expat back to less responsibility and autonomy than what he or she had abroad. Returning to re-

can be very effective coordinating teams in which there are nontraditional as well as traditional employees. □

*Cornelius Grove and Willa Hallowell are partners of Cornelius Grove & Associates, LLC, a cross-cultural management consulting firm based in Brooklyn, New York. The company offers "Homecoming: Seizing the Opportunity," a workshop (and related services) for returning expatriate families. For more information, call 718-492-1896.*