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International Assignment

Mentoring



BY JO RUST, GMS

International assignment mentoring programs are a source of intrigue for many HR professionals. While some of the benefits may be fairly understood, Rust says that few employers realize the full value of implementing such a program, either formally or informally.

A well-managed international assignment mentoring program may reduce the attrition rate of valued international assignees and keep these employees engaged and contributing to the organization long after repatriation. Of particular interest is that such a program typically can be implemented at minimal cost.

Sponsor program. Buddy system. Global coach. Although technically these programs have distinct differences, we have found that many multinational companies use them synonymously with a mentoring program.



In these programs, the mentor's role typically is defined as an established contact that provides support to the international assignee throughout the assignment and assists in identifying an appropriate position prior to repatriation.

Traditionally, a mentorship refers to a developmental relationship in which a more experienced person helps a less experienced person—typically referred to as a protégé, apprentice, or mentee—develop in a specified capacity. Basically, mentors show mentees the ropes, acting as cheerleaders and confidants, and may provide networking opportunities. A mentor provides a sounding board and can be a guide in the exploration of career interests and provide support for international assignees.

Mentoring programs can be formal or informal in nature. Formal programs have established procedures, selection criteria for mentors, time-frames for accomplishing tasks and functions, concrete goals, and training methods. Informal programs often are initiated when an employee requires assistance and seeks advice from an internal superior or professional from outside their organization.

Employers with formal or informal international assignment mentoring programs generally are trying to achieve the following objectives:

- Assist and facilitate the international assignment during expatriation

and repatriation.

- Provide ongoing communication related to home country current events and changes in the company.

- Keep assignees connected with leaders of the home country organization.

- Assist with adjustment to the new environment and workplace.

Mentoring programs for international assignments can be designed differently depending on the organization's needs, but the overall intent is to provide top management support to assignees' during assignment transitions at departure and repatriation. Successful re-insertion into the home country organization often is predicated on a successful repatriation process. Mentoring, therefore, is a strategic means to retain a valuable employee who can be re-integrated into the organization with their newly acquired international experience.

Survey Data — Mentoring

Primacy Relocation's Consulting Services Group recently completed the 2008 "Global Assignment Management Practices Survey," a comprehensive survey of international assignment management practices including *Fortune* 500 multinational companies—with the vast majority of respondents having an established international assignment program for more than five years.

The survey revealed that although companies increasingly have improved their international programs by actively assisting assignees and their families during the adjustment phase of an international assignment—incorporating such value-add services as targeted destination services with intercultural training, and career guidance—the continued communication with home country colleagues and management remains the assignee's responsibility.

Understanding the significant investment of an international assignment to the company, it is surprising that only 8 percent of our survey respondents indicated a mentor is selected formally and assigned to an international assignee from pre-assignment through repatriation.

Of the companies with a formal mentoring program, the following criteria were rated as the most important factors when selecting a mentor:

- credibility with home and host country management;
- former expatriate with mentoring skills;
- understanding of assignment's local culture and/or international differences; and
- sharp listening and decision-making skills.

A comment from the survey revealed, "mentoring is beneficial as it can produce a win-win situation for both the employee and the company. The employee 'wins' when the home country management team knows of his or her growth and experiences while on assignment and the company 'wins' when they recognize and utilize these talents and experiences and continue to reap the rewards from the investment made."

Although our survey did not delve

Chart 1: Ensuring Assignment Success

Other proactive measures used to ensure the success of an international assignment include the following:

	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS
Establish specific performance criteria for assignees	73 percent
Provide qualitative and quantitative performance indicators	40 percent
Re-evaluate criteria against changing market, workplace considerations, and cultural challenges	13.3 percent
Continuous contact and communication with mentor	20 percent
Develop/implement process to integrate gained knowledge into business management practices	6.7 percent
Plan for reinsertion to home country organization	20 percent
Dedicated HR staffing to identify available positions and assignee career-pathing	40 percent
Develop/implement repatriation plan to use and transfer global skill attained during assignment	40 percent
Track impact of global skill transfer on organization over time (ROI)	13.3 percent

into the reasons why mentoring is or is not provided, we find that HR often is challenged with time constraints and manpower issues. Mentoring currently is not viewed as a critical or must have program—unlike other high-yielding, corporate-wide compensation programs. However, mentoring should be a strategic and proactive measure, similar to succession planning.

So, if mentoring could reduce the attrition rate of valued international assignees, how much would it be worth to your program? As an exercise, assume 100 international assignments per year with a 10 percent attrition rate (10 employees). Multiply this number by the cost of a typical three-year assignment (approximately \$1 million), and this equates to a \$10 million dollar loss to the company—excluding the additional time and cost to recruit and hire an employee with the same skill level and experience.

Mentoring Needs

Mentoring is commonly used to groom up-and-coming employees deemed to have the potential to move into top leadership roles. Several industry sources have indicated that new employees who are paired with a mentor are twice as likely to remain in their job than those who do not receive mentorship.

The following provides a snapshot of various mentoring program needs. You can ascertain that different mentoring techniques are necessary to meet the needs of various groups.

Understanding your target group is the key in designing an effective mentoring program; however, unlike traditional mentoring programs, global assignment mentoring needs are different in terms of level of support, such as the skill sets that already are present in the assignee but require continued communication channels within the home country organization and support at repatriation.

Ideal Mentoring Programs

A mentoring program for international assignments must be strategic in design, assess leadership skills, and foster employee engagement. It has become an increasingly common practice for companies to rely on metrics to ensure they are moving in the right direction. Developing a program with qualitative measures will attract the attention of employees, assignees, and mentors and encourage support from the senior executive management ranks of the company.

Using a concept identified in a 2008 publication by The Boston Consulting Group and World Federation of Personnel Management Associations—“Creating People Advantage—How to Address Worldwide Challenges Through 2015”—designing and implementing a mentoring plan may include the following two major steps:

1. Understand how the company's overall strategy drives the demand for people; for example, long-term planning requires a four-

Chart 2: Program Candidate Demographics and Objectives

	NEW MANAGEMENT	GEN Y	INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS
Employment Status	Existing employee	Existing/new hire/intern	Existing/new hire high potential employees
Target Group	Junior executives	Graduate students	Pre-selected for specialized project
Skill Sets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possess leadership skills • Develop management skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inexperienced but confident • Establish career development track • Develop leadership and management skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experienced and seasoned employee • Possess leadership and management skills • Possess specific skill set
Program Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build “people” management skills • Experience download • Networking opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build “people” management skills • Set career/job goals • Experience download • Networking opportunities • Forum to allow input into decision-making process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior level support to affect results • Destination mentor (cultural, host country business guidance, and the like) • Identify replacement at repatriation

dation of fundamental knowledge.

2. Understand the linkages that connect strategy and a mentoring program, such as:

- **Sourcing.** Activities a company undertakes in selecting mentors.
- **Development.** Efforts at developing assignees and mentors that reinforce corporate goals.
- **Performance.** Approach to individual performance management that supports corporate goals.
- **Audit.** A system to track effectiveness and motivation.

Surprisingly, most companies place the onus on the assignee to engage the mentor when necessary. An ideal program should include defined check points and the success of the relationship established as an objective of both the assignee and mentor. The mentoring relationship often goes beyond the assignment term as the relationship evolves into a collaborative partnership that may last throughout their career.

Program Designs that Work

Even in the face of a shrinking workforce, increased workload and mounting responsibilities, it is the commitment by top management that ensures a successful program. Companies such as Henkel, Dusseldorf, Germany, and Medtronic Inc., Minneapolis, MN, have effectively integrated mentoring programs into their international assignment program and have engaged their most senior level management or business unit/department head in the process (senior level management desired because they can “affect” change).

After the assignment letter is fully executed, the assignee and mentor are both counseled on program guidelines and review the expectations, objectives, and goals of the assignment. It is not uncommon to have a mentor in one country and the mentee in another. Fortunately, with technology, mentoring is much easier than it was five years ago.

Technological advances allow long distance mentoring relationships through e-mail, telephone, and video conferencing.

HR commonly is tasked with administering the international assignment mentoring program. However, once the initial meeting is complete and roles and responsibilities are defined, HR typically does not monitor the ongoing relationship. The assignee is responsible for continuing communication with their mentor, and most companies recommend quarterly teleconferences with a face-to-face meeting encouraged during the annual home leave trip.

Key mentor functions include:

- pre-assignment and ongoing support as necessary;
- assistance with identifying position prior to repatriation within organization; and
- provision of both personal and professional guidance.

Chart 3: Developing a Mentor Program

Approval	Design & Development	Mentor Selection Criteria	Objective & Goal	Communication Plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtain Executive Management Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design must be developed with corporate business plan and strategy in mind Review existing programs (<i>other than global assignment benefits</i>) Use feedback from repatriated assignees to assess support needs Understand reasons for needing a mentor Identify top management level, business partner or division head responsible for placing assignee into organization at repatriation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preferably management with no direct reporting relationship with assignee VP level or above identified as the day-to-day mentor Prerequisite to have global assignment experience Global management experience Respected by peers, strong interpersonal and communication skills, and willing to give tough feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand the knowledge need to impart Establish clear objectives and goals for mentoring relationship Clearly define roles and responsibilities Establish expectations of mentoring relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentor established and identified in assignment letter Introductory meeting scheduled prior to expatriation Follow-up call six to eight weeks after relocation Pre-scheduled quarterly teleconference meetings (<i>monthly meetings ideal</i>) Annual face-to-face meeting arranged during home leave trip

The Time Is Now

Based on the information regarding the cost of international assignee attrition, we believe the implementation of an international assignment mentoring program is certainly a worthwhile goal.

First and foremost, obtain executive management support and commitment. With a well-designed program in support of the corporate business plan and with minimum financial investment, you are certain to have boardroom buy-in.

In an era where expediency is expected and a way of life, the following are a few ideas to implement a mentoring program on a “fast track” basis:

- Establish an agreement with the assignee at assignment initiation noting that they are expected to become a mentor after assignment completion/repatriation.
- Include mentors in annual succession planning management meet-

ing to evaluate manpower planning process.

- Require a debriefing with HR for the assignee and spouse two to three months after repatriation to assist in fine-tuning an effective mentoring program.

- Create an “international assignment blog” as an intranet web forum to keep assignees engaged (a word of caution—may require certain restrictions and possible oversight by HR).

- Develop training materials, using personal international assignee experiences, including expectations, meeting schedules, and roles and responsibility of HR, the assignee, and the mentor.

Conclusion

Managing talent is a topic either at or near the top of a company’s agenda—regardless of region, industry, graduate level, or experience. It involves attracting, developing, and retaining all employees—

managers, specialists, and individual contributors—with high potential. As individuals gain more employment options, companies soon may find talent more scarce than funding. Through mentoring, companies can keep their employees engaged in the organization via deliberate actions.

The primary goal for a mentoring program is to support the company’s commitment toward the retention of its most valued assets—its employees.

Not having a mentoring program can be costly. With cost constraints and the current world economic conditions, the right people need to be in the right places.

Going forward, a mentoring program is not a “nice to have”—it is a “must have.” ■

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