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Editorial

The success—or failure—of an expatriate assignment will typically have a high impact on an organization's presence in the host country. This simple fact no doubt explains why, in the field of cross-cultural management, so much attention has been placed on assessing the suitability of candidates for international postings.

Before I raise any false hopes, let me tell you straight away that there is no magic wand to guarantee the success of an assignment. There are, however, a number of instruments and methods whose proper use can guide selectors and candidates toward making the best possible decisions.

When involving employees and their spouses in a Candidate Assessment Program, it is crucial that they do not feel they are about to face a tribunal. Rather, they should be made to understand that the goal is for them to objectively **assess their own strengths and vulnerabilities**, and ultimately decide whether the assignment is the right one for them at that point in their lives.

Let me hand over now to Robert Limoges in Virginia, North Carolina. Robert dedicates a great deal of his time to helping budding expatriates make the right choices, and we are happy to share some of his experience with you in this month's newsletter.



Róisín Saunier
Associate Partner

Candidate Assessment Programs for successful international assignments

by Robert Limoges, Senior Consultant

Finding the right person to fill a global business role is often a very difficult task human resource professionals and line managers face. Candidates not only need to perform well in their job abroad, they and their family members must also be a good fit for the culture of the country to which they are assigned. All too often I hear managers saying only 3 months in advance, *"I have to send somebody to Singapore... but who? Well, let's send our best salesperson as she has a proven track record"*. Unfortunately, this type of selection process can easily result in costly premature return or ineffective performance throughout an assignment.

Some failures could be avoided **if multinational firms looked beyond tradition-bound selection practices**. Careful assessment and selection of the right people considering the ability of the candidates and their families to adjust to and function effectively in a new cultural environment can greatly reduce the chances of failure and the negative consequences of an early return.

A few months ago, I was contacted by the HR Director of a large multinational who wished to put in place a **Candidate Assessment Program** for a Canadian national who had expressed interest in relocating to Nairobi with his wife and 3-year-old son to fill the role of Financial Controller for the West African division. The candidate's predecessor hadn't fared well, and the HR Director confided that the company simply couldn't afford another mistake.

After quite a bit of discussion, we agreed that the objectives for the program should be to:

- Provide the candidate and spouse with an opportunity for self-assessment and deep reflection about their motivation and suitability for the assignment.
- Explore their ability to adjust to the significant lifestyle changes and challenges they would face in the new country.
- Identify developmental competencies issues (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that could be addressed in pre-departure training and/or through on-site coaching during the assignment.
- Provide Human Resources staff and Senior Management with the information they needed to make an informed decision about the suitability of the candidate and his family for the expatriate assignment.

In order to meet these objectives, I proposed using a variety of techniques explaining that **no single assessment instrument can generate sufficient data for a reliable candidate assessment**.

Candidate assessment program for successful international assignments (continued)

A few weeks prior to the program per se, I asked the couple (let's call them Mike and Jennifer) to complete a questionnaire about themselves, situations they were likely to encounter in a new international setting, what they would do in each situation and why.

Based on their answers and a telephone discussion, we decided to build our face-to-face sessions around:

- video case study analysis of communication between people from different cultures
- role play of situations expatriates face
- in-depth joint and separate interviews
- self-diagnostic tools relating to targeted *Indicators of Effectiveness* for international assignments

Indicators of Effectiveness

Derived from extensive research conducted in the cross-cultural field over the past 40 years, the *Indicators of Effectiveness* fall into a range of categories that include:

Tolerance: How fast a person judges others' actions and beliefs

Flexibility and Adaptability: Mental and physical capacities of individuals for dealing with change

Self-awareness: Insight into one's behaviors and motives

Social Intelligence: Understanding and sensitivity to the subtle, important aspects of social interactions; ability to scan one's environment

Interpersonal Communication: Ability to communicate effectively, adopt different styles

Problem-solving and Decision-making: Critical thinking skills, setting priorities and identifying alternatives

Emotional stamina: Ability to handle complex information quickly and efficiently, tolerance for ambiguity, perseverance

Independence: Not dependent on others for validation

Motivation: Commitment to the assignment

Although Mike and Jennifer had good ratings on many of the above items, as we looked at the expatriation from all angles, Jennifer began to realize that she was not very open to learning about a new culture and language. She was preoccupied with leaving her career behind her in Toronto and on 3 separate occasions spoke of a sense of losing her social identity. Mike began to articulate concerns too. He wondered how well he would cope with the flexible African approach to time management.

Now that we had unearthed the risk factors, I invited the couple to follow up with HR to let them know how the assessment went. In a feedback session with HR, I recommended that the couple receive **pre-departure training** to delve deeper into Kenyan culture, explore strategies for adapting professionally and personally, and ultimately create an action plan they could begin implementing prior to departure.

At the end of the *Candidate Assessment Program*, Mike and Jennifer both had a good sense of what issues required further thought, what kind of additional support they might need, and what next steps to take to better ensure their own success. And let me tell you the end of the story: They went there and adapted really well.

Mini bio: Robert Limoges



A native of Montreal, Canada, Robert assesses, coaches, trains and counsels executives and their management teams in international business practices and working with other cultures at home and abroad. He provides candidate assessments, cross-cultural training and coaching to international assignees and their spouses on the complex issues related to cross-border integration and human interaction across cultures.

Cultural Tips

Selecting candidates for international assignments

- 1 – Go beyond technical and business skills when defining selection criteria.
- 2 – Actively involve the candidate and his/her family in the decision-making process.
- 3 – Use a mix of self-assessment tools and formal interviews conducted by an experienced professional.