

Living And Breathing The Language

Any organisation wishing to send an employee abroad must do so with great consideration. Not only must you send the right person to the right place at the right time, you also need to ensure your time and money injected into the process is worthwhile. This is where having a good grasp of the local language can make all the difference.

More than 80% of EU countries already have a language requirement tied to immigration criteria, so learning the language and understanding the culture is vital.

Not forgetting that learning a foreign language has the power to break down communication barriers and foster greater cultural and human understanding – ideal for building a successful business.

Moving abroad can also be mentally challenging for employees and their families. Even in a country that appears to be similar to where they live, there may be language barriers and cultural differences they hadn't expected. It could take them a while to feel settled and get fully up to speed in their new work environment.

Imagine being unable to communicate with not only colleagues, but doctors, dentists, schools, even in the supermarket. Not knowing the local language can often make employees feel isolated and disorientated, and they may sometimes experience a loss of confidence professionally and socially. Managing this before and during an assignment is critical to adjustment in the new location.



Companies should also consider return on investment. There must be assurances that once the assignment is over, the relocating employee – with all their valuable cultural and language skills – will stay with your company. Your company should then benefit from all the experience and knowledge that they have gained.

58% of these moved because of their career. Suffice to say that many of those will have been faced with typical relocation challenges: trying to work out where to live, the customs and the local transport system.

Imagine how much easier it would have been if they had received professional support with learning the language?

A significant 38% of businesses consider language skills helpful in building relationships with clients, customers and suppliers³, so any investment your company makes in “onboarding” your employees will support success in the future. Conversely, KPMG’s Global Assignment Policies & Practices Survey identified that only 40% of companies surveyed offer language training to employees and family members⁴.

International Relocation: Top Challenges

There are five key challenges a company will face when relocating abroad. These include:

1. Ensuring Your Return On Investment

66% of businesses are known to operate international relocation projects⁵. The reasons for this are multiple, from increasing operational efficiencies and business to greater market penetration or the transfer of knowledge. Yet with international relocation so popular, many business leaders will be questioning its value and the return on investment they expect to see. In fact, only 58% of overseas assignments are deemed to be successful, so leaders have every right to be cautious⁶.

Companies must only send their best and brightest. It takes guts and dedication to make a real success of it, and this includes being

willing to learn the language. The relocating employee needs to feel they have the full and personalised support of your company, before, during and after their relocation.

This includes providing language skills training that fits in with their daily lives, integrating with the new team and support post assignment when they return home. The board will perceive the project as an expensive failure if anyone returns home early.

2. Ensuring Optimum Performance From The Outset

Taking time to get “settled in” is not ideal for companies sending staff abroad. It may be tough, but any lost time has an associated cost, so you need to ensure that your relocating employee hits the ground running (almost) as soon as they have unpacked their bags.

This means accelerating their adjustment through preparation. It will include ensuring they have access to language training (at home, in the workplace or on the move), supporting them with finding accommodation and facilities, familiarisation of the area and cultural differences. Providing a positive experience from the outset is key; there’s no room for negativity if you’re looking for optimum productivity.

The National Foreign Trade Council estimated that assignment failure rates could be as high as 50% if you consider failure to be early return, compromised performance or resignation upon repatriation⁷.

Many global companies want great value from their mobility programme and great relocation experiences for their people. However, they also need to consider additional requirements. Choosing the right mobility partner offering the full mix of skills and education options ensures that there is no compromise in the process.

Case Study: Marrying Language And Culture

Company A sent a small advanced group of employees to Japan to pave the way for



a two-year project. Their role was to build relationships with local influencers and political figures as well as identify and engage local vendors and partners.

Recognising the complexity of Japanese culture and language, Company A engaged us to deliver cultural and language training programmes to prepare their employees.

We set realistic linguistic goals and created a curriculum that:

- Built basic vocabulary and grammar rules to be able to greet local contacts, make basic introductions and demonstrate respect for Japanese culture and contacts
- Identified how Japanese language could illustrate the formality and nuance of Japanese culture.

The students were motivated and progressed well through their lessons over the course of the first year. A sister entity has now approached us to discuss a similar programme for their Japan-bound employees.

3. Getting Partners And Children On Board

Ensuring partners and children are settled is equally as important as ensuring your employee is. In fact, it can be even more challenging for a spouse to integrate into their new society than anyone else. Your employee has their workplace and a structure there; the children have their school life and a routine. Often it can be more difficult for the spouse who may not have a job in the new country.

They may not know the language and they probably won't know anybody at all – or have a way of making friends. If they become unhappy it's highly likely the assignment will fail, so it's important to include them in your onboarding plans. Ensure they are included in learning the new language and intercultural training. Make sure they don't lose their confidence through making any cultural faux pas. You could also give them objectives such as joining groups, both local and expat, or organise excursions so they get to know the area. They could also be interested in volunteering or paid work opportunities if their visas allow.

4. Preparing The Receiving Team

It's important not to forget the impact employee relocation has on the people in the office they are relocating to. They may be unaccustomed to working with foreigners and there's a chance it will cause disruption, particularly at the beginning of the assignment. Ensure you have fully informed the staff why there will be a new person working in the office, why you chose them for the job and the skills they will bring to the team.

Encourage team events where the language barrier might be less of an issue: simple social activities will help with team

bonding, more so than just meals out or drinks where language barriers can become an issue. Introducing a buddy system will also help employees with getting to know one another. You must also provide intercultural training for the receiving team, particularly if this is the first relocating employee that will be in the office or if they are to be their direct manager.

According to PWC's research calculating the ROI of international assignments across nine organisations, companies were losing up to 40% of returning relocating employees within 12 months⁸.

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5. Readjusting During Repatriation

Returning home at the end of an assignment is actually more unsettling than most people think. There may be an element of initial excitement at the thought of seeing friends, family and familiar places. Yet once the novelty has worn off, your employee will need to readjust to living back in their own country. This could mean getting used to the climate, food, working styles, the people and a new routine.

It is often a time when employees start thinking about moving on once again, to a new job, a new company or a new country. Yet, what is most important for your

company, is that they stay on with you and you benefit from the knowledge and language skills they have gained during their stint abroad.

Your company invested in them and you need to do all you can to keep them employed to protect your ROI. Support them with settling back into your offices, their new role and their surroundings. They will appreciate your understanding and be more inclined to stay on with you.

Case Study: Using Language To Accelerate Adjustment

Company B moved a large number of employees and their families to China ahead of a launch.

Their primary focus was the need for relocating employees to quickly be able to work effectively with local hires – many of whom had limited English skills. We scheduled individual lessons to accelerate learning and focused the lesson plan on workplace vocabulary acquisition.

To provide more flexibility in delivery, students were given the option to take virtual lessons. Company B also recognised that for these assignments to be successful, accompanying family members also had to be able to adjust to the host location and that offering language learning to them was equally critical.

For these students we focused on building more "daily living" linguistic skills, with some of the lessons delivered in supermarkets and coffee shops to capitalise on learning by using the language.

Conclusion

For a successful international relocation and to generate a positive ROI, tailored support and education are needed before, during and after the assignment. It's important to remember that language skills cannot be learned in a matter of weeks, and this is why flexibility in language learning is so important.

Very few people have the time or inclination to spend in evening classes in the run-up to their relocation. These days we are all accustomed to using technology for rapid access to information – and language learning should be no different.

Access to learning must be made available to employees through the technology they use every day. It should be accessible wherever they are and whatever time of day it is. Language learning should be fluid, lived and breathed.

Over the last 50 years, we've seen and supported all types of international relocation scenarios. Now, in order to expand the portfolio of services we offer, we have partnered with Learnship – with more than 1,000 trainers worldwide – to provide language lessons to our clients.

This partnership enables us to add virtual instructor-led language training to our current onsite offering and support a positive assignment ROI. Through Learnship we combine transformational technology and progressive instruction methods to create the ultimate language learning experience.

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Joanne's leadership helps Crown to deliver training solutions that meet clients' corporate goals and the needs of their relocating employees. She works with individuals and teams around the world to provide the support services that are key to a successful relocation. Joanne has worked in commercial training for over 20 years and global mobility for more than 15 years. If you have any questions regarding this article or would like to find out more about our other services, please contact Joanne, jdanehl@crownew.com or visit our website at www.crownworldmobility.com.



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