

16.2: Effective Training for International Assignments

Learning Outcomes

- Differentiate between documentary training, cultural simulations, and field simulation training.



Living and working in an international community, such as Hong Kong, can be rewarding and challenging—if you are adaptable and prepared for what to expect.

Global companies often send managers from the home country office to work in foreign subsidiaries. Sometimes this is done for the development of the manager, so she can gain experience in the global operations of the company. It may also be so the company can exert more control over the subsidiary. When the assignment is for a long period, the manager's family may also be sent. This represents a significant investment for the company, and it does not want to see the manager fail and return home early. The cost of a three-year assignment averages \$1 million.^[1] One way the company can help the manager succeed is to provide training before she leaves so she knows what to expect.

What constitutes an effective training program depends a lot on its “rigor,” or how thorough and challenging the program is. If the employee is going for a relatively short time, say less than a month, then a **low-rigor program** may suffice. If the employee and his family are moving for a year or more with the intent of living in the host country, then **high-rigor training** is required. With a brief assignment, adequate training may involve watching some videos on local culture, going to lectures, and attending briefings on company operations in the host (destination) country. For longer assignments, extensive experiential learning, interactions with host country nationals, and language training may be offered not just for the employee but for the whole family. Studies have shown that international assignments are more effective when the employee's family is included and consulted in the relocation and training processes.

Documentary Training

Documentary training is textbook and classroom learning, which focuses on looking at differences between cultures and is a key part of both low-rigor and high-rigor training approaches. Differences are examined because they are potential friction points that create misunderstandings and hurt feelings. You have probably heard many examples of cultural differences involving common human interactions, such as greetings, gender relations, and the giving of gifts. For example, Asian business people defer to authority very differently from Westerners. They will not correct their managers nor will they make suggestions in public that would cause their managers embarrassment. Food in China is served hot, and to be offered cold food may be offensive or off-putting.

The perception of sickness and disease differs greatly in different cultures even among closely related ethnicities. A British worker would probably not take kindly to what you consider to be sympathetic inquiries about his latest illness and treatment. Americans, on the other hand, tend to “over share” and be more frank about personal health issues. Americans also tend to be casual about invitations and don't like to pressure people on the spot. An expatriate in India may invite a coworker to a party he is having on the weekend and then follow up with “Come over if you want to.” To many cultures this is heard as “We don't really care if you come or not.” There are many excellent sources of information on specific cultural traditions and norms of various countries, but multinational businesses often arrange for professional cross-cultural trainers to provide onsite lectures, videos, or workshops on cultural differences.

Cultural Simulation Training

After learning the cultural “do’s and don’ts” of a host country, many companies will ask their employees to participate in **cultural simulations** in which they will role play various situations and practice responding in culturally sensitive ways. This process is most effective when the training takes place in the host country or when the trainer can include people from the actual host country to help. The goal is to duplicate as closely as possible scenarios that the employees may face, such as having to question or to reprimand a local employee, making a presentation to host country upper-level managers, or how to approach a person of the opposite gender in countries where the sexes do not mix as freely as in the United States.

Field Simulation Training

When the company believes that the employees have successfully passed the “survival training” stage, it is time for **field simulation training**. The employee (and family) visits a neighborhood of the same ethnic background as the destination or, if the trainees are already in-country, then they move out to the “real world.” Depending upon the conditions, an individual may be dropped into a rural area with limited resources and told to get back to the office. Or a family may be moved into temporary housing so that they can meet their neighbors, shop for food, locate transportation, and just explore the area. When the simulation is over, the trainees come back to the center to compare notes and share experiences.

Benefits of Rigorous Training Programs

For extended assignments, a rigorous training program benefits both the employee and the employer. It prepares an employee (and family) for success by the following:

- Providing practical assistance for relocation efforts. Some questions the employee might have about the new location include: How long will it take to get there? What kind of money will I be using? How far is the office from my home? Do I need a car? What medicines can I get and what must I bring with me? What should I bring in the way of technology, and will I have to pay duties on imported goods?
- Giving the employee information that will allow her to make an informed decision about the assignment.
- Providing emotional security about the change. A rigorous training program greatly reduces the chance that the employee will leave the assignment early because of a misunderstanding.
- Increasing the cultural sensitivity of the employee. By training employees on cultural matters, the company lessens the likelihood that its reputation will suffer among the host country employees.

The disadvantage to the company involves the cost of the training and the out-of-office time of the employee to undergo the training, but this is a small price to pay considering the potential benefits.

Finally, companies preparing their employees for an expatriate experience should also offer readjustment counseling when the employee is due to return. Re-entering the home country can produce a reaction called **reverse culture shock** that describes the bewilderment and distress experienced by individuals suddenly exposed to a new, strange, or foreign social and cultural environment—in this case, their own.

? Practice Question

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1. J. Stewart Black and Hal Gregerson, “The Right Way to Manage Expats,” April 1999, accessed July 31, 2017, <https://hbr.org/1999/03/the-right-way-to-manage-expats>↵

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