7 Tips for Keeping your Expats Happy!
Here’s how an overseas assignment typically begins:

“Would you be interested in moving overseas to our office in Host Country for a couple of years?”

With one question, you’ve potentially changed your employee’s life – forever!

Some people have never travelled far from their own city, let alone their countries. Others may have been on an overseas trip or two. No matter what their previous experience might be, actually living abroad can mean profound personal and professional changes.

Especially if the destination is far away, the climate, culture and even communicating with the locals may be totally unfamiliar.

An employee who becomes an international assignee needs to be well supported. Familiarity and guidance with passports, visas, permits and other paperwork are only the beginning. Common sense, resourcefulness and adaptability are all key to success in a new life abroad.

Here are seven expert tips to help your international assignees smooth the stressful transition to life abroad—a life that may be like nothing he or she has experienced before.
When the assignment is offered, encourage your assignee to learn more about the destination. In this digital age, information has never been easier to obtain. However, it can also be overwhelming, and difficult to assess for trustworthiness.

Living Abroad has destination information on over 177 destinations, compiled specifically for international assignees and their families. You can learn more about this resource with a free online trial.

Whether a prospective international assignee uses Living Abroad’s comprehensive tools or not, it’s important that the employee begins to develop an understanding of the country they will be living in. They may wish to begin with three C’s: climate, culture, and communication. All have profound effects on daily life.

**Climate**
Weather has a profound impact on attitude, with assignees and locals alike. Will the employee bask in a temperate climate while those in their home country shiver in the snow? Or will they, too, be confined by the elements? Is the climate of the destination hot all year round, as in Singapore, or extremely cold in winter, as in Beijing? Are there wet and dry seasons, or a full range of the elements?

**Culture**
Employees should have an understanding of why things are as they are, and learn about local sensitivities and key issues that are important to the local population. How should people be greeted? What behaviors that are acceptable at home are not acceptable in the new location?

**Communication**
Getting around in a new city or country can be daunting, especially if an assignee is not fluent in the host country language. An additional challenge to the employee may be when signage is primarily presented in the local script, such as Chinese or Arabic.

Whenever possible, assignees should be encouraged to learn basic courtesies (Hello, how are you?), directions (turn, right or left, straight) in the local language. Not only will this show the locals that they have made some effort to assimilate, but it might well help them out of a difficult situation, such as needing a restroom urgently!
Provide a “look-see” trip

Visiting the designated host country is one of the most important preparation steps for a successful move.

If your company policy permits this, allow the prospective transferee to go to the city or country where he or she will be posted. While there is cost involved, such costs are small when compared to the cost of sending the wrong employee on an assignment. If an assignee can’t settle owing to culture shock, homesickness, or other issues, this can, in fact, be more costly.

The last thing any manager wants is a midnight call from an assignee, pleading to return to the home country. Allowing an assignee and partner to spend a few days getting to know a destination can go a long way to ensure that does not happen.

Look-see trips also give prospective assignees the opportunity to talk with staff who may already be living in the country to learn about local nuances, local dining and, possibly, identifying preferred places to live. This is especially important if a partner and family are involved in the relocation. After all, it is often said that happiness begins at home.

Many assignees, understandably, initially worry about the well-being of their family while overseas. Housing and education are usually two areas of great concern.

Ideally, a well-organized itinerary of things to see and do should be put together. Schedule a variety of people for the assignee to meet. If possible, include a real estate agent or two. Expectations for housing and its costs are among the most sensitive issues in any relocation.

In addition, arrange for the expat to visit essential places. This certainly means the destination office, local shopping, and other key facilities. If applicable, include area schools. If a club membership is likely to be included in the offer, make sure a visit to the club is on the agenda.

A look-see visit can also help a prospective assignee assess and begin to deal with cultural differences and expectations. If assimilation and integration are key elements for the assignment’s success, this trip becomes even more vital.

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Support reaching out

It’s well documented that employees’ concerns about an impending move change dramatically from pre-departure to settling in after relocation. Stress levels rise, and tension pervades almost everything the employee undertakes.

Moving is one of the most stressful events in a person’s life, even when it is only within the same city. The stress involved in moving to a new city or country increases exponentially.

Questions such as “Am I doing the right thing?” or “How will I get on along with my new colleagues and neighbors?” or “Will I miss my friends and family too much?” will all be weighing upon the prospective assignee.

Many larger, international companies have a relocation department or specialist to help facilitate transfers and relocations. If this is available, it is an excellent resource to suggest to assignees.

In addition, encourage assignees to reach out to people they met while on the look-see trip for final reassurance before they leave.

Pre-departure, suggest the assignee talks about particular personal concerns with the appropriate personnel. It may even be ideal to schedule regular discussions throughout the assignment.

After an assignee arrives in the host country, contacting colleagues with in-country experience who are well placed to offer advice can be crucial.

If there is adequate support on the ground in the new country, often the first week will be taken up with a familiarization tour of the company’s offices, getting to know other expats and locals, house/apartment hunting and the like.

New assignees are often warmly welcomed into the existing expatriate community in any foreign city. They can bring news from home, or from their employer. They can also share their own experiences, especially if they have lived in other locations in the company network.

Becoming an expatriate is almost like joining a club. Relationships which are formed overseas bind people together, and may well last a lifetime—even after the initial assignment is complete, and employees have moved home or elsewhere.
Once settled into a house or apartment in the host country, employees should be encouraged to get to know their neighbors—both expats and locals alike. Usually, these people are best placed to inform them about the amenities and services in and around the area in which they live, helping with practical necessities as required.

Expat communities in many cities overseas are often quite tight-knit. Many people know each other directly, or indirectly through business links and social interaction.

While people of the same nationality often stick together socially, living overseas offers an excellent opportunity to meet other people from many other countries and cultures. This can be a very rewarding, enriching experience.

International assignees might get to know a neighbor from France, while learning a few words of Chinese from the couple living across the road. They might attend a barbecue with people who have been posted overseas in Australia, and then share a boat trip with a Japanese family. There are many opportunities for assignees, partners and their families to find firm friends.

These positive interactions help the settling in process and might even help with business development. Most expatriates are far from home and live in a culture that is not their own. Striving to be neighborly should become second nature.

Whether it’s offering help settling in, babysitting, or pointing out where the nearest 24-hour pharmacy is, there is likely to be someone to help lend a hand. In fact, many expatriates also tend to look out for each other in times of difficulty, as the shared experiences bring them together.

Reaching out is especially important for the accompanying partner, if there is one. Partners can easily become isolated, especially if the assignee is working hard to demonstrate why he or she was selected for an overseas position.

Becoming an expatriate alters one’s perceptions of life and the world in general. For the most part, it is a positive experience. Many people who are relatively private in their home country must reach out and interact with others in their host country. While it may begin with necessity, it can become second nature.
Connect with clubs, organizations and societies

Clubs, organizations or societies can be great ways to make friends abroad, even for those who are not “joiners” at home.

In fact, clubs and other organizations are often the key mainstays of expat life. The lifestyle of many expatriates revolves around them.

Sometimes clubs can offer an alternative place to get away from the office, becoming sanctuaries. Clubs help relieve the pressures of the working environment, and allow expatriates to meet others in similar situations, with similar interests.

Depending upon the scale of facilities, heritage, and traditions, a club can represent a piece of home, a touch of familiarity in an unfamiliar environment. At other times, clubs are useful places to learn something new, or even cultivate or conduct business.

There are three primary types of clubs that expatriates join and frequent:

**Sports clubs**
Members can play a sport of choice, whether it is soccer, tennis, squash, badminton or even golf. Partners and families either join in, use the gym, do yoga or aerobics, dine or just generally relax.

Many expats prefer to join teams where they can enjoy a sport they used to play at home. If the climate is temperate, they may be able play the sport more often than they could have done in their home countries.

**Social clubs**
Members can participate in various activities. Clubs can also provide opportunities to do volunteer work for charitable causes.

**Business/social clubs**
These clubs are ostensibly for members of the business community to get to know each other better and interact. They include Chambers of Commerce (such as AmCham, BritCham, CanCham), Round Table and the Rotary Club. They have branches in many countries and host social events and dinners where partners are able to attend.

Most assignees will also find that there are, typically, quite a number of societies or clubs which organize a variety of less formal gatherings, such as boat trips or days out to local attractions, on a regular basis.

All of these clubs are great ways to make contacts, develop relationships and generally adapt to an expat lifestyle.

Most clubs and/or organizations are recommended by word of mouth, and many are listed on the Internet, or in local publications. Some clubs have waiting lists for membership.

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Promote integration/learn about and respect the local culture

Spending time in a foreign country without getting to know something about the local culture, the local customs and language increases the risk that an assignment will not be successful.

Even if assignees are not fluent in the local language, it will be beneficial for them to interact with the locals—and not just store clerks, repair experts, or household help.

Enroll the assignee in a language-training course, preferably with a small group of others, so they can enjoy the camaraderie and interplay of learning. If this is not practical, a one-on-one tutor may work.

Encourage assignees to get out and about, maybe initially with local work colleagues or other locals who belong to the same clubs or societies. They can visit local cultural and historical places, or maybe even join the company hiking or sports teams, if they exist.

Attending the company annual dinner is de rigueur, especially in Asia, where often the senior management is expected to participate in a show!

Other than office colleagues, expats usually find that native residents are proud of their country and their customs, their festivals and events, and love to share details with people from overseas.

Suggest that assignees visit local temples, parks, museums, art galleries and begin to observe the local culture. Assignees should try new dining or shopping experiences, sample local foods, buy local arts and crafts, and generally immerse themselves in the culture. They should talk to their friends about how they view their host country and society.

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By learning from the locals, expats develop their own perceptions about the country in which they are living, while at the same time broadening their horizons and understanding why different people and cultures do things differently. But whatever they do, suggest they avoid comparing the amenities and environment where they are now living with “home.”

Making an effort to integrate into local society, rather than isolating oneself or simply living in an “expat cocoon,” will go a long way towards assimilation.

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Make it all add up/draw upon the experiences

Suggest that assignees keep in touch with key people in your organization, both to remain aware of HQ goings-on and to stay on the radar of those who can assist with their next position.

Staying in contact at various points throughout the host country stay can help assignees leverage their accumulating experience and acquired skills to frame and plan for their next step after this assignment.

It also ensures that your organization will make the most of your investment in this employee’s growth and success.

Expatriate life, wherever one is posted and no matter how seamless the initial transition appears to be, is a highly fraught experience for many. However, living the expat lifestyle can be immensely rewarding.

Professionally, it can offer much career advancement. Socially, it can empower one with a greater understanding and tolerance of other countries, cultures and customs — which benefits the employee, the assignment, and the company.

Living Abroad delivers specific in-country details on passports & visas, work permits, orientation info, housing resources, appliances & other household goods, electrical current, mass transit, medical insurance, vaccines, health care, security issues, learning the language, expat community, airport transportation: and critical business and social customs.

“This relieves a lot of the pressure from my HR department because most of their questions are answered in the report.”

Our company has subscribed to Living Abroad’s International Relocation Center for almost ten years. Employees can read about the country before applying for an international position. Once they are accepted, the detailed country report on their destination helps them get up to speed before they go and the critical first 90 days. This relieves a lot of the pressure from my HR department because most of their questions are answered in the report.

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