



FIT TO TRAVEL

The common methods of choosing staff for overseas assignments are much less formal than they should be.

By Jane Menzies and Christopher Shen

Interviews with 20 Australian HR practitioners responsible for international staff assignments in multinational companies have revealed that selection processes tend to be informal in one of two ways. Either the existing processes are not used, or there are no formal processes to use.

“We have a fairly strange and mystical way of selecting our expatriates,” said the HR manager for a multinational manufacturer.

The practitioners indicated that contacts and networks within organisations played an important role. Employees were commonly approached to fill positions overseas that were not advertised. On one occasion this practice was deemed necessary because a confidential international acquisition was transpiring.

Some respondents said internal selection requirements for international assignments were far less rigorous because the employees had undergone a recruitment process before the organisation had initially hired them.

The rate of failure for international assignees is about 10 per cent, according to a survey last year by GMAC Global Relocation Services. The survey revealed China, India, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia and Iraq as common ‘problem locations’.

The implications of failed international assignments can be considerable. They are an expensive investment, and failure can damage the staff member’s morale and confidence, and disrupt colleagues. It is therefore critical to select international assignees by formalised, rigorous and well-considered means.

FIRSTLY, ORGANISATIONS should have a formal selection process that is open, transparent and well-communicated. Positions should be advertised throughout an organisation using means such as email and the intranet so all staff have the opportunity to apply.

The Australian interviewees said they specifically targeted the employees the managers thought suitable. However, this creates bias and does not allow for diversity in opinion about what makes a person suitable for an assignment.

It is preferable to develop a pool of potential assignees. Organisations can have formal committee-driven procedures whereby senior managers nominate employees for the pool, which can be developed as short-list for international positions.

It may be beneficial to regularly collect and



■ The UK was among countries including China, India and Saudi Arabia that are considered “problem locations” for international assignments, a survey has found.

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although we would recommend more formal behavioural interviewing. Interviewing panels are a good idea—perhaps the selecting manager in the target host country, senior managers in the home country, and HR managers—because multiple viewpoints can be considered. Interviewing can be facilitated by conference calls and video-conferencing.

Another process for evaluating suitability for international assignments is the psychometric assessment of candidates’ beliefs, experiences, values, knowledge, temperament and interests.

Ensure that selection criteria are appropriate and accurate. They may include general information about the position, a job purpose statement, information about relationships and interactions, and details of education, skills and experience. They may also include key performance indicators, accountabilities and measures, and the employee’s match in relation to the corporate values and mission.

More specific to the task at hand, selection criteria can include the inclination and enthusiasm of candidates for global relocation, and their prospects of adapting to another culture. Research indicates that reasonably extroverted people may be better suited to adapting to foreign environments because they are better at relating to people, communicating and solving problems.

Many of the HR practitioners interviewed said they constantly sought to identify top performers who exceeded expectations and those with high potential for international assignments. Candidates were assessed on the probability that an international placement would assist with the organisation’s development, and whether the assignment would be beneficial to the person’s own professional and career development. Such development was rated especially important by respondents from large multinational organisations with the philosophy that people aspiring for leadership positions benefited greatly from international experience. Accordingly, international assignments were often viewed as desirable preparation for future leaders. ❌

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review staff résumés to consider work experience that could contribute to success in an overseas assignment. One HR manager said their company had an ‘accomplishment résumé’ where employees recorded what they had done in the organisation, their levels of performance over the years, their views of themselves, and their aspirations—including transfers. The information, part of sophisticated HR planning, was put into a database for use globally in identifying the best people for international assignments.

Performance appraisal systems can also be used to assess interest in and suitability for international assignments.

According to the anecdotal evidence, interviews conducted over dinner and discussions on the telephone are common selection practices,

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