

# Expatriate assignments demand careful consideration

August 16, 2015

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Working abroad has its attractions but candidates should prepare well before making the move and be aware of the high failure rate. Photo: Trevor Collens

Making the decision to move overseas for work, or receiving the offer of an overseas posting is an event many people strive for countless years to achieve. An expatriate assignment is an important career step and retains a romantic tinge from years gone by. In a global working environment, the ability to lead and work across a range of countries and cultures is an essential stepping stone for further career progression.

While this may be an exciting opportunity and for many, a real adventure, the failure rates for expatriate leaders remains high.

Studies put the failure rate at between 25-50 per cent. Internal hires generally have an about 20-30 per cent failure rate and this rises to 50 per cent when expatriate assignments are included. Considering the obvious cost of (a) recruitment (b) international relocation (c) transport (c) housing and accommodation (d) school fees and other benefits associated with expatriate assignments, the cost of expatriate leaders is enormous. There are several things to know and prepare for before leaving to maximise the opportunity and minimise potential mistakes. Here are some starting points.

Do an orientation visit to the new country to become familiar with locations such as the office, accommodation and important services like shops and schools. Commute to and from the new office (in the method you expect to use when you have moved) in peak time to become familiar with the time and logistics. If children are also relocating, visit the local and international schools. As in Australia, schools vary in terms of teaching styles, subject matter, student profiles, waiting lists and fees. Sometimes the employer pays for school fees but not necessarily. The employment contract is important to understand and negotiate. Have a very clear understanding of the reality of the complete package and assess its value against the cost of living your desired lifestyle in the new location. There can be some very rude shocks if this is not clearly understood. The "good old days" of financially lucrative expatriate packages are long past us. In some cases the offer to go overseas is a broadening sideways appointment with little financial incentive attached.






Take time to learn about the local culture. Working and leading in another country will be different and it is important to adapt, not lead in the same way you are used to in Australia. Ironically, it is often the countries that are most different that are easiest to adapt to, as the differences are so obvious. Mongolia, France or Dubai has very different work practices to Australia as compared to England.

Finally, explore your personal strengths and weaknesses as an employee or leader. Your current team are best placed to help you understand what you do and don't do well. This will be important to lead in another country. Being successful in one country is no guarantee of success in another. Many a good leader has fallen because of this lack of insight.

An overseas appointment should be an adventure and a great learning opportunity. Enjoy and Skype your family regularly!

Padraig O'Sullivan is the co-founder and managing partner of OSULLIVANFIELD. His prior corporate and entrepreneurial careers crossed healthcare, sales and marketing and consulting industries. His new book *Foreigner in Charge* is out now.

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