

Homeward bound

There's room for improvement when repatriating overseas workers

BY STEPHEN CRYNE

In the book *The Art of Coming Home*, author Craig Storti says repatriation is more difficult than going abroad. While the allure of a foreign location is often key to securing the agreement of an employee and his family to accept a foreign posting, the return home is not always so rosy.

Canadian employees are going abroad in record numbers, with more than 60,000 reporting a place of employment outside Canada, according to the 2006 census conducted by Statistics Canada. And as the global economy returns to growth mode, so too will the demand for Canadian expertise in areas of infrastructure engineering, mining, transportation and IT — industries that are expected to do remarkably well in the coming months as global economic stimulus packages begin to gain traction.

A survey conducted by the Canadian Employee Relocation Council (CERC) found two-thirds of its members with international assignees reported those workers as being between the ages of 40 and 50 and, in the majority of cases, they are accompanied by a working spouse or partner.

Support for departure

On the outbound leg of an assignment, there is plenty of time and attention spent in preparing for the foreign posting.

It's not unusual for employers to provide programs and benefits such as intercultural and language training, schooling assistance and spousal employment supports, taxation and financial planning. Housing is most often provided and can surpass what the employee may be used to in the home country, and it's common to see programs include perks such as drivers and domestic help. Children may attend private schools and in certain locales, because of security

concerns, have a car and driver at their disposal.

Coming home can be a different story. Lack of repatriation programs can restrict the effective deployment of scarce resources to critical projects. It can discourage others from taking on an assignment after seeing how the company supports workers returning from overseas and it can lead to loss of critical knowledge in the organization.

International assignments aren't cheap and typically range from \$300,000 to more than \$1 million. Many workers — as high as 50 per cent — leave the organization following a repatriation, writes Storti.

When this intellectual capital, expert knowledge and international expertise walks out the door, it often walks to the competition — totally devaluing the gains of an international assignment to the organization.

What employers should do

What are some of the things successful organizations are doing to ensure the success of employee repatriation programs?

"The communication process around the repatriation is the major issue and probably the most neglected," says Sylvie Poirier, manager, global compensation and payroll, at L-3 MAS Canada, a Montreal-based aerospace and defence firm.

"The employee has been gone in some instances for a year or more and has lost the sense of belonging to the organization."

Organizations need to clarify the expectations of the employer and the employee and involve the group of employees with whom the expat is going to work and ensure he feels welcome. If at all possible, there has to be some free time and support granted to the employee to reinstall his family, adds Poirier.

Employers need to be mindful that man-

agers often find themselves in positions of lower authority upon their return. They may have had significant prestige while heading up the foreign division, prestige that simply evaporated upon their return to Canada. For that reason employers need to integrate the assignment and the repatriation process into the employee's overall career path. There is little point investing all that time, energy and money only to see the employee unhappy and unproductive.

Employers also need to find ways to apply the employee's international knowledge to the domestic operations. There are plenty of new skills acquired while on assignment that can post huge benefits upon return.

Don't forget the needs of the family either. Transitioning back to "the real world," absent of chauffeurs, domestic help and private schools, can often bring stresses to the family and the employee. In many instances the support networks that were in place prior to departure have changed or disappeared.

Key to addressing these concerns, and to Poirier's point, is communication. Expectations have to be explained and managed before the employee returns home. In some of the more successful relocation programs, in addition to employee career support, there is also support offered to ensure the family reintegrates into the community.

Bad economy poses more challenges

The complexities of the current economy are presenting additional challenges — business contacts may have changed and program sponsors and networks could have shifted dramatically.

Uncertainties around employment and housing mean more headaches for HR and relocation professionals. With a little planning, improved communication, flexibility in approach and managed expectations, those challenges can be met.

Stephen Cryne is president and CEO of the Toronto-based Canadian Employment Relocation Council. For more information, visit www.cerc.ca.