

Foreign assignments increasing, along with employee resistance

BY STEPHEN CRYNE

Canadians are working outside of the country in increasing numbers. Data from the 2001 Census show that more than 68,000 Canadians had a place of work outside of the country, an increase of about 20 per cent from the 1996 census. And, as Canada continues to play a growing role in an expanding global marketplace, there is every expectation that the need for Canadian talent to work abroad will grow.

In the Canadian Employee Relocation Council's most recent *Survey of Corporate Relocation Policies*, more than two-thirds of the 88 firms surveyed had transferred staff overseas in 2003, a 14-per-cent increase from 2001. In the same survey, family issues ranked as the number one challenge for an overseas assignment.

While working in foreign lands may hold appeal, it's clearly not for everybody. There are many barriers to overcome for both the organization and employees when it comes to a foreign posting. Shorter-term assignments, lasting from six months to three years, are becoming more common. Partly in response to the personal realities that individuals are coping with and also as companies adjust to rapidly changing business opportunities.

Whether it's a short- or long-term assignment, many of the challenges remain the same: getting the right people in the right job, at the right place and at the right time.

Today most Canadian families have both parents working, and there are more than 7.3 million women in the labour force, so when it comes to taking on a foreign assignment, it's no surprise that family issues are top of mind. Statistics Canada also reports a 40-per-cent increase in the number of female managers since 1990. Today, their careers are an even more important consideration than perhaps was the case 10 or so years ago. The bottom line: Moving is a far more complex undertaking than ever before.

"Moving people is a very expen-

Overcoming impediments to relocation means easing concerns about family issues, career planning, international security

sive undertaking for the company," says Sue Irwin, responsible for international HR and relocations with ConocoPhillips Canada in Calgary. "It can cost three times as much to move somebody from say Houston than it does to hire a local person in Calgary and so it has to be the right fit."

Irwin manages a portfolio of both inpatriates (people coming to work in Canada) as well as expatriates. "While shorter-term assignments meet business needs, they also provide the much-needed career development and experience to the best talent in the organization," she says. "And it's not just about getting the right technical talent. Equally important is the ability to work with people with varied skill sets and from different backgrounds." All are critical skills on the global stage.

Terri Lynn Oliver, international HR advisor with Siemens Canada, notes that at Siemens, "the selection of high potentials (for assignment) is part of the overall corporate approach for succession planning and career development."

With a global workforce of 420,000, 6,600 of which are in Canada, there is no shortage of foreign opportunities. At Siemens the process for selection is quite structured and the company maintains a pool of potential talent to draw from as opportunities arise. The challenge from a corporate perspective, says Oliver, is managing the expectation and linking the move to a strategic objective. "People want to know, 'What position will I come back to?' In most situations it's impossible to give a guarantee about opportunities upon the completion of the assignment. And so people will often opt for the domestic promotion."

When it comes to individuals accepting an assignment, family and career issues dominate. "The spouse's career is a major consideration particularly on a longer assignment," says Oliver. "Schooling is also

a challenge and Siemens tries to be innovative for both its inpatriates and expatriates in finding workable solutions within budget."

Schooling issues are echoed by Irwin who adds, "There are many students in gifted and extra curricular programs, people just don't want to uproot their families."

Thomas Vulpe, with the Canadian Foreign Service Institute, an agency within the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, says family issues can predict the successful completion of an international assignment.

"Various studies have shown family issues to be the single most important issue in early repatriation," he says. These subtleties may not be readily apparent before the move, but culture shock and the inability to work in a foreign location can often be too much for the trailing spouse, leading to an early return.

"Companies are becoming more concerned about these soft issues," says Mike Watters, vice-president of sales with moving firm Allied International. These are not just Canadian problems, he adds. He tells the story

of the wife of a French company executive who was "abandoned" in the Toronto-area, without access to any support. "She couldn't speak a word of English and left saying it was the worse two years of her life."

While family issues are the main barriers to individuals taking on a foreign assignment, safety is an escalating concern. Canada is a safe country to live and raise a family. Many of the countries where Canadians are working are becoming more dangerous it seems with each passing day.

"One of the key parts of safety training for foreign-aid workers in hot spots like Columbia, Bolivia and Afghanistan, includes looking under their vehicles with a mirror to check for bombs," Vulpe says. Not a very pleasant routine as you're also trying to comfort children who are used to walking to school. These issues are compounded by the fact that the "megalopolises where people are being posted are becoming more polluted, and access to quality health care is a concern. Ten years ago it wasn't such a big issue, but today it's a big decision," he adds.

Perhaps that's why Terri Lynn Oliver says, "flexibility to shorten an assignment and planning for the worst," are a key part in the development of any foreign assignment.

Stephen Cryne is the executive vice-president of the Canadian Employee Relocation Council, an organization dedicated to education, research, knowledge and advocacy on all matters related to workforce mobility. He can be reached at (416) 489-2555 or scryne@cerc.ca. Visit www.cerc.ca for more information.

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10 best practices for foreign assignments

- Recruit people with competencies for international assignments.
- Make assignments part of career development and succession planning.
- Pre-screening of individuals is key.
- Look beyond technical skills; people skills and progressive leadership styles are critical to a successful assignment.
- Screen for international readiness using behavioural testing methods.
- Provide cultural training for all family members.
- Outline a repatriation plan up front.
- Maintain a pool of pre-qualified individuals to draw from in response to changes in business opportunities.
- Communicate and involve expatriates in home company news and affairs on a regular basis.
- Be flexible and have contingency plans in place.