

The Expatriate Observer

A Publication of ORC Worldwide

Spring 2007 • Volume 30 • Number 2

Making the Most of Your Pre-Assignment Preparation

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Going on an international assignment necessitates a balancing act. On the one hand, you need to address the concerns of your family as they settle into unfamiliar neighborhoods, schools, shopping outlets, and recreational activities. At the same time, you have to focus on the requirements and responsibilities of the job for which you are being transferred. Although your employer's role in supporting your efforts often includes the provision of (or reimbursement for) several orientation and preparation services, it is essentially up to you to make optimal use of this assistance, supplementing information where necessary.

What is usually included in this type of pre-departure assistance? Common programs to help you prepare for a successful relocation cover items that address different aspects of your assignment, such as a general orientation, cross-cultural and language training, security briefings, and a pre-assignment trip. Whether or not the organization provides all such program aspects—and who in the family is eligible to participate in them—depends on the organization's expatriate policy, overall budgets, the conditions in the host location, planned length of time overseas, and so on.

ORIENTATION: ASSIGNMENT 101

A comprehensive orientation to the parameters of the expatriate assignment in general and what the company



IN THIS ISSUE

Making the Most of Your Pre-Assignment Preparation

How Good Is Your International Compensation Vocabulary?

Practical Considerations for Working Effectively Across Cultures

Russia: What You Need to Know About Local Crime and Risks

Personal Safety: Precautions When Living and Working in Russia

The Top Concerns of Expatriates in Manila, Philippines

expects of you with regard to assignment objectives in the host location will get you started. This discussion usually addresses all the basic needs required by your family, such as the physical logistics and scheduling of the move, budget limitations (e.g., regarding shipping and storage), key company contacts both at home and abroad, external vendors who will be supporting your family either at home or in the host country, and briefings about the subsidiary or host-country operation.

Chart 1 on page 2, "Common Employer Practices Regarding Orientation," based on ORC's 2006 *Worldwide Survey of International Assignment Policies and Practices*, illustrates how employers today provide such general information. Some regional differences found in the ORC survey are interesting:

- Organizations based in The Americas are slightly more likely to use outside consultants to handle orientation, while those headquartered in Asia-Pacific are more likely to rely on in-house personnel.

- Asia-Pacific firms are also more likely to use the experience of employees who are familiar with the location, while those based in Europe and the Middle East are more likely to use written materials.
- Companies headquartered in Europe, the Middle East, and Japan are least likely to offer orientation services to their outbound employees.

CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING: AVOIDING THE FAUX PAS

Depending on your destination, you may not believe that cultural training is necessary. But consider this point: If people in your home office who speak the same language think that they are saying the same thing when their colleagues think they are saying something different, how much harder is the communication when you are dealing with colleagues and business associates from other cultures? Not only the spoken word but also body language and gestures speak volumes—often at very different levels. Training from an inter-cultural perspective prior to departure (and sometimes even on-site) about the host country and the dynamics of the local company operation is crucial.

ORC’s 2006 survey offers some interesting regional findings about employer practices regarding cross-cultural training:

- Organizations headquartered in the Americas are more likely to use an external consultant for inter-cultural programs.
- Japanese firms are least likely to offer cultural training to their expatriates.

LANGUAGE LESSONS: PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

When going to a foreign country, you must learn not only technical business jargon but also words and phrases used in daily conversation so you can interact productively with colleagues, clients, local vendors, neighbors, and so on—as does your family. However, learning to speak the native language is not only about words. Your communication efforts with host-country residents will be more effective if you also understand their thinking patterns and reasoning styles. Many companies offer some form of language training to the expatriate’s family members, too, though sometimes for shorter periods or with a smaller reimbursement amount.

SECURITY BRIEFINGS: ESSENTIAL DATA

This aspect of pre-departure (and, often, ongoing on-site) assistance pertains not only to cities or regions where hardship or dangerous conditions are

Chart 1: Common Employer Practices Regarding Orientation

Do you have an orientation program?

	Company Headquarters			
	Asia-Pacific	Europe/ Middle East	Japan	The Americas
Yes, by outside consultant	36%	35%	25%	40%
Yes, by company personnel	53	34	45	41
Yes, by employees familiar with the host location	39	24	20	17
Yes, by written materials provided for employee	24	27	15	20
Yes, when host location presents difficulties	14	8	7	6
No	8	25	25	19

Source: ORC Worldwide’s 2006 Worldwide Survey of International Assignment Policies and Practices

Be an active participant in your preparation.

blatant but also to “safe” cities that may have dangerous locales or where local criminals focus their attention on unsuspecting foreigners (often perceived to be wealthy targets). Along with security information, it is always helpful to obtain your company’s procedures in case of emergency, as well as contact data for key individuals both at home and abroad in the event of a necessary evacuation or the occurrence of an unexpected situation (which can be anything from political riots to medical problems).

THE PRE-ASSIGNMENT WHIRLWIND VISIT

Employers generally offer you a short trip to the new host location after you have accepted the assignment, although some organizations provide an introductory preview to persuade you to live abroad. But keep in mind that this trip is not meant to be a quick vacation. Your employer expects you to use the time (anywhere from a few days to a week-and-a-half) effectively, which means taking the time to find a suitable house or apartment, enroll your children in either a public or private school (or make other arrangements), meet with local managers and staff, and so on.

Researching the host location and its environs before your actual visit is advantageous, and can

save you time once you are on site. But remember, an actual visit is far more effective than reading about the host location or hearing about it from a third party, so become as familiar as possible with your surroundings in the short time allotted so that your next visit—when you actually move in—is a less traumatic event.

WHO BENEFITS FROM THE ASSISTANCE?

While not all companies provide or pay for these pre-assignment opportunities, those that do sometimes restrict eligibility to the expatriate alone or perhaps the expatriate and spouse, rather than include the entire accompanying family in the activities. Overall participants to ORC’s survey reported eligibility trends as represented in Chart 2, “Who Gets to Participate?”

PARTNERING WITH YOUR EMPLOYER

Whether or not your company provides a little or a lot of assignment preparation (or the money to obtain what you need), be proactive and supplement that information with your own research. Learn as much as you can about the country’s traditions, customs, social nuances, neighborhoods, politics, and so on. If there are expatriates who have recently returned from that location, be sure to sit down with them and discuss their experiences, or get in touch with expatriates currently living in the host city. Be an active participant in your preparation. Ask questions and gather information before you go on assignment—not when it is too late.

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Chart 2: Who Gets to Participate?

Who is eligible for the following services?

	Worldwide Participants			Not provided
	Expatriate	Spouse	Family	
Orientation	75%	51 %	29%	20%
Cross-cultural training	64	51	41	29
Security briefing	52	30	16	43
Language lessons	81	70	50	11
Pre-assignment trip	71	67	18	25

Source: ORC Worldwide’s 2006 Worldwide Survey of International Assignment Policies and Practices