

Managing Expatriates' Return: Repatriation Practices in a Sample of Firms in Portugal

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Abstract : Literature has revealed strong awareness of companies in regard of expatriation, but issues associated with repatriation of employees after an international assignment have been overlooked. Repatriation is one of the most challenging human resource practices that affect how companies benefit from acquired skills and high potential employees; and gain competitive advantage through network developed during expatriation. However, empirical evidence achieved so far suggests that expatriates have been disappointed because companies lack an effective repatriation strategy. Repatriates' professional and emotional needs are often unrecognized, while repatriation is perceived as a non-issue by companies. The underlying assumption is that the return to parent company, and original country, culture and language does not demand for any particular support. Unfortunately, this basic view has non-negligible consequences on repatriates, especially on expatriate retention and turnover rates after expatriation. The goal of our study is to examine the specific policies and practices adopted by companies to support employees after an international assignment. We assume that expatriation is process which ends with repatriation. The latter is such a crucial issue as the expatriation and require due attention through appropriate design of human resource management policies and tools. For this purpose, we use data from a qualitative research based on interviews to a sample of firms operating in Portugal. We attempt to compare how firms accommodate the concerns with repatriation in their policies and practices. Therefore, the interviews collect data on both expatriation and repatriation process, namely the selection and skills of candidates to expatriation, training, mentoring, communication and pay policies. Portuguese labor market seems to be an interesting case study for mainly two reasons. On the one hand, Portuguese Government is encouraging companies to internationalize in the context of an external market-oriented growth model. On the other hand, expatriation is being perceived as a job opportunity in the context of high unemployment rates of both skilled and non-skilled. This is an ongoing research and the data collected until now indicate that companies follow the pattern described in the literature. The interviewed companies recognize the higher relevance of repatriation process than expatriation, but disregard specific human resource policies. They have perceived that unfavorable labor market conditions discourage mobility across companies. It should be stressed that companies underline that employees enhanced the relevance of stable jobs and attach far less importance to career development and other benefits after expatriation. However, there are still cases of turnover and difficulties of retention. Managers' report non-negligible cases of turnover associated with lack of effective repatriation programs and non-recognition of good performance. Repatriates seem to having acquired entrepreneurial spirit and skills and often create their own company. These results suggest that even in the context of worsening labor market conditions, there should be greater awareness of the need to retain talents, experienced and highly skills employees. Ultimately, other companies poach invaluable assets, while internationalized companies risk being training providers.

Keywords : expatriates, expatriation, international management, repatriation

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