

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 23, 1996

THE FAMILY IN THE CLASSROOM: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE FOR TEACHING ISSUES RELATED TO EXPATRIATE ASSIGNMENTS

Robert E. Ledman, Gannon University

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an experiential exercise that focuses on issues related to workers facing international assignments. It illustrates that those workers face a multitude of issues. It further demonstrates that managers who want employees to realize the maximum benefits of international assignments should be aware of, and prepared to deal with, those issues. Some of the topics that are easily addressed with this exercise include the need for culture and language training for the employees and their families and the impact that international assignments may have on an employee's family and how that may affect an employee's willingness to seek such assignments.

INTRODUCTION

The business environment of today is becoming increasingly more global. That characteristic has triggered the need for managers and executives who are able to assume assignments in countries other than their borne. Those assignments may be short term for a new facility start-up or similar need. However, frequently those assignments are for more than one year and involve the employee relocating his or her family. There is an extensive body of literature that speaks to the ramifications of such assignments on everything from career progression to re-entry adjustments when the expatriate returns. This literature is often remote and difficult for undergraduates to identify with if they have not had personal experience with international career assignments. Discussions of the issues presented in most textbooks can seem so removed from many students' life experience as to be incomprehensible, or at the very least difficult to understand fully. The challenge is even greater in an institution where a large percentage of the students come from small towns with only local or regional businesses.

This paper presents an experiential exercise designed to help bring some of the issues to life. It requires students to address the topic in the context of a family that is facing the possibility of an international assignment. The exercise can be used in a number of settings. It should be useful when discussing human resources in the context of an International Business course, when discussing international issues in a Human Resources course, and when covering human resources in an International Management course.

The remainder of this paper presents the exercise as it is carried out in a classroom.

INTRODUCING THE EXERCISE

Before the exercise is begun the topic of international assignments is covered. It is valuable to spend significant time reviewing several subjects. Specifically, it is important to discuss: (1) the role of international assignments in preparing rising executives for managing global enterprises; (2) the need for the expatriate to have knowledge of the language, culture, and customs of the host country; (3) the extent to which most firms prepare the expatriate for the assignment; (4) the problems that can, and do, arise when the overseas assignment ends and the employee returns; and (5) how overseas assignments can affect an employee's family, especially as it relates to dual career families, children's education, and changes in lifestyle. After the discussion of the above issues the students should have the necessary foundation to make the exercise meaningful.

The students are then divided into "families" of four or five. Since many students today have only one parent at home it is helpful if some groups do not have students to fill both parental roles in the exercise. Each student is assigned to play a family member and given a description of that person. Descriptions of family members are given in the appendix. The specific parameters given for the exercise can vary according to the professor's course focus. It has been quite successful when the parameters are set in such a way as to intentionally create dilemmas or potential conflicts of interest between the family members. The scenario that has been used by the author is presented here since it has shown itself to be effective.

THE EXERCISE SCENARIO

Students are given their roles and reminded to play them as realistically as possible. They are then told that the family is having a discussion to explore how a proposed overseas assignment will affect the family members. The family's goal is to try to reach a decision about whether the assignment should be taken. Secondly, they must decide if the family will relocate or only if the family member being offered the assignment will relocate. The specifics of the assignment are then

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 23, 1996

outlined. They are: (1) The assignment is for a minimum of two years, with possible annual extensions resulting in a total of four years. (2) The family, or the employee, will be provided, at company expense, one trip back to the states each year for a maximum period of fifteen days. (3) The employee will not receive any additional housing or cost-of-living supplements described in the role assignment if he or she chooses to go overseas alone. (4) If the employee goes overseas alone, they should expect their living expenses to substantially exceed the living allowance being provided by the company.

The students are asked to address the following questions in their discussion.

1. What are the most important concerns this family has about relocating to a foreign country?
2. What information should they seek about the proposed host country to enable them to make a more informed decision?
3. What can the employer do to make the transition easier if the employee goes overseas alone? If the whole family relocates?
4. What should the employer do to enhance the probability that this proposed assignment will not create unnecessary stress for the employee and the employee's family?
5. What lessons for managers of expatriate assignees are presented by the situation in this exercise?

The groups are given twenty to thirty minutes to discuss the above questions and attempt to reach some family consensus. They are encouraged to try to reach a consensus during the discussion. However, if a consensus is not possible they are instructed to resolve any differences in the manner they think the family in the role descriptions would ultimately resolve any differences.

Following the group discussion, the class is reassembled to explore the answers arrived at by the "family" groups. Each group is asked to report their answers to the questions. One question should be thoroughly explored before proceeding to the next. Each group reports, without comment or discussion, until they have finished reporting their responses to the question under consideration. They are then encouraged to explain the rationale for their answers and clarification questions are taken from the remainder of the class. After each group has reported on a given question the professor queries the class about how their answers are consistent, or inconsistent, with common practice of managers as described in the available literature. The discussion of student answers may carry-over to a second

class period if the class is only fifty minutes.

VALUE OF THE EXERCISE

The exercise described here provides students the opportunity to experience some of the issues faced by managers and expatriates when international assignments have the potential to impact significantly upon an employee's personal life as well as professional life. Students are often surprised by the magnitude of the subject. They will typically express surprise, and even dismay, that international assignments can be fraught with such an array of issues not related to career advancement. This surprise is particularly apparent in traditional undergraduates. They are generally not as sophisticated about the demands placed on professionals by the sometimes-conflicting interests of career and family. Since many of the students in the authors university are from small towns they may be somewhat less sophisticated about such matters, but even those students who come from larger cities with international businesses express surprise at the degree of potential conflict inherent in international assignments.

Another subject that typically gets the students' attention relates to the need for information and training about cultural aspects of the host country. The family members are described intentionally in a manner to raise numerous questions about such topics as health care systems, educational systems, professional opportunities, and costs of living. The individual family members have different needs ranging from an effective health care system to professional job opportunities to special educational needs. These needs are intended to be reflective of those faced by the contemporary family, especially with the rise in dual career families and improved diagnostic capabilities--both medical and educational. If one or more student groups are set up to have only one parent the problems become even more important. In the case of a single parent family the decision choices are limited. The option for one parent to go overseas while the other remains in the home country with the children is no longer available. The students identify numerous information needs related to the culture and society of the proposed host country. This presents an outstanding opportunity to discuss, or review previous discussions, about the extent to which countries are similar or different on numerous sociocultural variables. This provides an excellent opening for the professor to reinforce the importance of

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 23, 1996

knowing those differences and similarities when doing business in the international environment.

CONCLUSION

The exercise presented in this paper is an effective way to enhance students' understanding of several topics related to international employee assignments. By putting the exercise in the context of a family, students can readily identify with the roles. This identification enables them to examine topics presented in class in a way that makes them directly relevant and more easily understood. The exercise is effective for showing the importance of cultural training and awareness. It also is quite effective for presenting topics related to the potential conflicts faced by an employee who is identified for an international assignment; especially conflicts centered around the balance between career and family concerns. Additionally this exercise is useful to point out many of the issues faced by employers who have a need for executives with international experience. Employers are often challenged to make the international assignment as minimally disruptive to an executive's family as possible. That challenge may be insurmountable, thus putting the employer in the position of possibly losing valuable employees.

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 23, 1996

Appendix

DESCRIPTIONS OF FAMILY MEMBERS

Person Being Offered Overseas Assignment

This person is a middle to upper level executive who is on a fast track to senior management. He or she has been offered the opportunity to manage an overseas operation with the assurance that upon return to the States they will be promoted to a vice presidency. The company will pay all relocation expenses, including selling costs for the family home and the costs associated with finding a new home upon return. The employer will also provide language training for the employee and cultural awareness training for the entire family. The employee will also receive a living allowance equal to 20% of salary. This should be adequate to provide the family a comparable standard of living to, that which is possible on the employee's current salary.

Spouse of the Person Offered an Overseas Assignment (Optional)

This person is a professional also. This person has highly transferable skills and experience for the domestic market. It is unknown how easily he or she may be able to find employment in the foreign country. This person's income, though less than their spouse's, is necessary if they are to continue paying for their child's tuition and be prepared for the next child to enter college in two years. This person has spent fifteen years developing a career, including completing a degree at night.

Oldest Child

This child is a second semester junior in college and is on track to graduate in 16 months. Transferring at this time would probably mean adding at least one semester to complete the degree. He or she has been dating the same person for over a year and they have talked about getting married immediately after graduation, although they are not yet formally engaged.

Middle Child

This child is a junior in high school. He or she has already begun visiting college campuses in preparation for making application in the fall. This child is involved in a number of school activities, including being the photographer for the yearbook and playing a varsity sport. This child has a learning disability for which services are being provided by the school system.

Youngest Child

This child is a middle school student, age 13. He or she is actively involved in scouting and takes piano lessons. This child has a history of medical conditions that have required regular visits to the family physician and specialists. This child has several very close friends who have attended the same school for several years.