

Who is Best Suited to Live and Work Abroad?

Sending an employee on an overseas assignment is often described as a \$1 million decision. The typical assignment lasts three years, with the employee bringing along his or her family, with their education, housing, transportation and many other expenses paid for by the employer.

People who work overseas are typically called “expatriates,” and becoming an expatriate is a decision that will affect the entire family 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. The formal **definition of an expatriate is someone who works in a country other than their “home”** country or country of origin. This would include someone from the U.S. working in China or someone from China working in the U.S.

The number of people who live and work in a foreign country usually is small when compared **to an organization’s total workforce. But sending an employee on an expatriate assignment** can be costly for an organization, as well as **the employee’s family, just as the “\$1 million”** reference suggests.

At E·A·S·I·Consult®, we help prepare employees for the changes that come with taking an expatriate assignment. Early in the process we use a cultural readiness questionnaire called SAGE (Self-Assessment for Global Endeavors) to help employees and their partners identify strengths and areas of challenge that may confront them on an international assignment.

SAGE looks at six different dimensions that relate to whether a manager is going to be successful on an overseas assignment. The six dimensions are: 1) Sociability, 2) Emotional Strength, 3) Openness to People, 4) Self Reliance, 5) Intellectual Curiosity and 6) Flexibility.

These dimensions align closely with the traits of superior senior and mid-level leaders that my colleague Dr. Joseph Gier, vice president for consulting services at E·A·S·I·Consult, wrote about in another article.

To recap those capabilities, Gier noted that superior senior managers:

1. Lead Across the Enterprise
2. Demonstrate Strategic Foresight
3. **Establish and Communicate the Organization’s Brand**

For middle managers, Gier said those who are viewed as superior:

1. Accurately Understand Self

2. Encourage/Promote Learning and Continuous Improvement among Team Members
3. Ensure Team Members Work Collaboratively Throughout the Enterprise

Now let's compare the traits identified by Gier with the SAGE dimensions to identify where they align.

1. Sociability (SAGE). How outgoing is the employee, and does he or she enjoy connecting with others socially? In the U.S. we are very task-oriented. Many people in **other countries don't want to do business with you until they know you as a person.** There is a bit of this capability around Collaboration (Gier).
2. Emotional Strength (SAGE). Does the employee stay calm under pressure? Working in **a foreign country can be very stressful, particularly if you don't speak the language.** Understanding Self (Gier) also involves emotional strength.
3. Openness to People (SAGE). Does the employee enjoy getting to know other people? Does he or she do this willingly, or see this as uncomfortable and a burden? Again there is a bit of Understanding Self in this one. There is also a bit of knowing how to promote Collaboration, **as collaboration often requires an appreciation of others'** differences.
4. Self-Reliance (SAGE). Can the employee think and act independently? Expatriates in management roles often are faced with bigger challenges and must make decisions with less information and no outside input. There may be a little bit of Strategic Foresight (Gier) in this.
5. Intellectual Curiosity (SAGE). Does the employee willingly explore the unknown? Does he or she enjoy sampling and learning about new cultures, foods and ways of thinking? This is Learning and Continuous Improvement (Gier), but with an international flair.
6. Flexibility (SAGE). Is the employee willing to look at things through a different lens or with different criteria? Rigid people do not do well on international assignments. This is Learning and Continuous Improvement again.

It appears there are a number of connections between this list of international capabilities and the middle management skills identified in the research that Gier led and wrote about earlier. The three senior management skills tend to be more strategic, but anyone who applies them without first using the filters of intellectual curiosity, flexibility and openness is flirting with disaster.

About the Author

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