

COMMERCE IN FRANCE

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Going Home from Abroad: Making Your Repatriation Easier

by Fernando Salvetti

"I expected my colleagues to be envious," one European executive told me after returning from a three-year mission in Asia. "Or at the very least thirsty for my exciting tales about how culturally and professionally enriching it was to live and work in a totally different part of the world."

Rather, he said, he was now considered an outsider—no longer part of the inner circle of day-to-day company life—was assigned boring home-based projects and shortly afterwards decided to leave the company to which he had dedicated 25 years of his life. Like him, many managers returning from international assignments wind up feeling not like conquering heroes but like disillusioned victims of an "out of sight, out of mind" syndrome that damages their careers.

Even those employees welcomed back with respect and admiration are not immune to feeling that their days at the company are numbered. In these instances, it is not their colleagues or bosses who inspire the desire to bolt, but their own disappointment at what they find upon their return. Thanks to their transfer overseas, their universe has been expanded, their storehouse of experiences has been broadened, their presumptions about themselves and the world have been challenged and sometimes drastically changed. They no longer see a place for themselves at company HQ.

To say nothing of the fact that making a household move—any household move, be it across the street or across the globe—has been deemed the most stressful occurrence in most people's lives short of the death of a loved one!

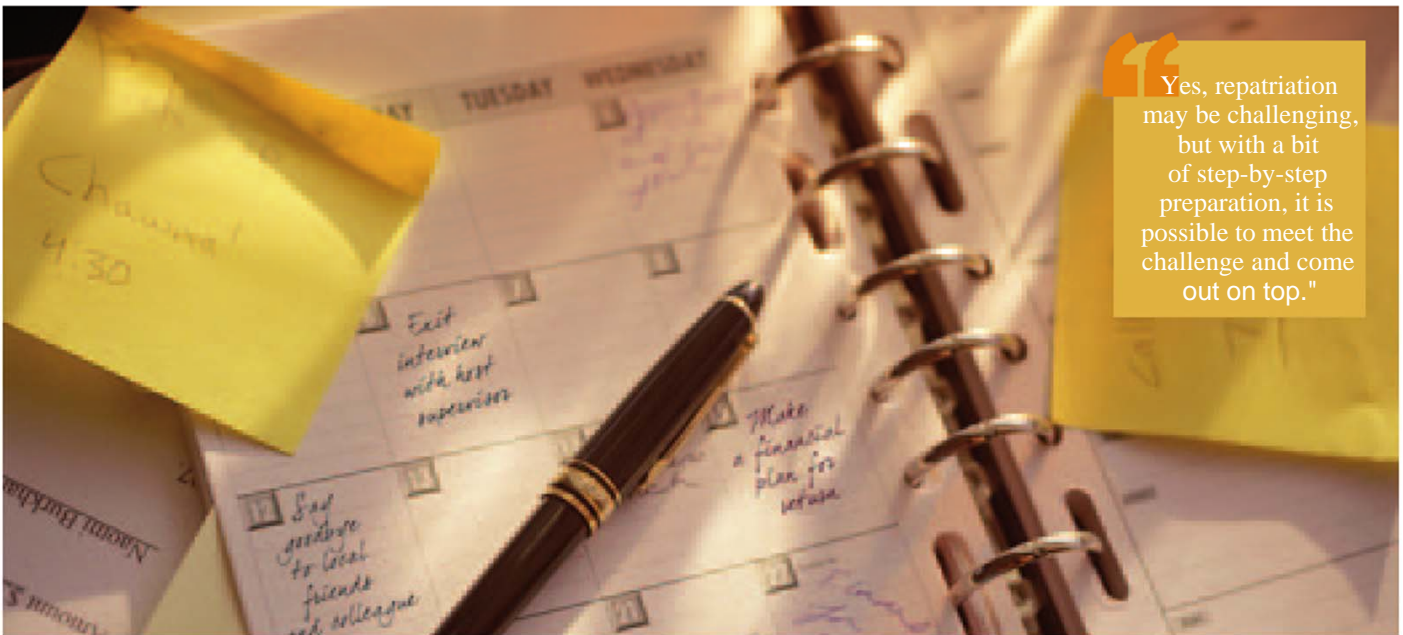
Yes, repatriation may be challenging, but with a bit of step-by-step preparation, it is possible to meet the challenge and come out on top:

The Master-Plan

12-9 months prior to repatriation

- Start a diary highlighting changes and challenges you and your family have experienced—and are experiencing now. Translating emotions into written words has a cathartic effect.
- Confirm the date of your repatriation (and your family's, if different) with home and host supervisors and HR. Then inform home and host family, friends, colleagues.
- Discuss your upcoming repatriation with fellow assignees, or friends, colleagues and family members who have traveled extensively: they may have helpful hints.
- Plan ways to savor and celebrate your final months abroad (you'll regret not having done this once ensconced in the routine back home).





“Yes, repatriation may be challenging, but with a bit of step-by-step preparation, it is possible to meet the challenge and come out on top.”

9-6 months prior

- Keep that diary going.
- Schedule an exit interview with your host supervisor. Discuss the positive take-aways from your overseas assignment as well as what you can learn from the negatives.
- Initiate a discussion with your home supervisor about newly acquired skills and how your experience will affect your job when you return. Remind him or her that at a time when innovation is an organizational mantra, having an "outsider's" viewpoint is a competitive advantage.
- Start handling the many-faceted logistics of the move itself, whether personally or through HR and/or agencies.
- Make a financial plan for your return. Consult your tax adviser and HR regarding tax requirements and other compliance issues.

6-1 month prior

- Don't neglect your diary. Include a section with thoughts about how your personal and professional overseas experiences may be relevant to your "new" home life and your personal and professional goals.
- Gather mementos and photos to share with home-based family and friends and to remind you of your life abroad.
- Take advantage of repatriation counseling.

- Set aside time to say goodbye to local friends and colleagues, making plans to stay in touch, where desired.

Now that you're back home

- Continue the discussion with your supervisor that you started before you left, exploring your foreign assignment's effect on your current job and overall career, and the added value you now bring to your work. Repeat: remind him or her that at a time when innovation is an organizational mantra, having an "outsider's" viewpoint is a competitive advantage.
- All the while keeping contact with overseas friends and colleagues, seek out home-based co-workers with similar experiences and consider forming a support group or connecting with a mentor. Investigate local organizations with a global focus so as to meet others who have lived abroad.
- Volunteer to give advice to colleagues leaving for distant lands.
- Sign up for repatriation coaching, and read about reverse culture shock—the feeling that your home country is a bit foreign.
- Don't put that diary down! Use it for reflecting upon your individual and family struggles and successes as you settle back in--and upon phenomena that now seem strange at home. Share some of those observations with family and friends. Write a memoir, or a travel article for a newspaper, magazine, website.

Home sweet home

Coming home can seem deceptively simple—after all, the culture is familiar, isn't it? Many repatriated people experience a sense of alienation in their own countries. The pressure on a couple or family can be significant; relationships can easily be tested.

Professor Fernando Salvetti, PhD, is Founder and Managing Partner of LKN-Logos Knowledge Network and co-editor of the book "Glocal" working Living and working across the world with cultural intelligence.





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