

The Culture of Business - In Perspective

By: Stephen G. Wright

“There is no place like home.”

During a recent lunch presentation by a colleague of mine he mentioned something interesting. He stated that one expat lady he is acquainted with said why should she go home, she has never had it so good here!

Yes indeed you expats tend live the charmed life don't you? Before you dismiss this concept think about it. What kind of inducements did your company use to get you here? What is your salary, do they pay for your travel, what about your home, do they provide a driver and a car for your use, a per diem, perhaps even a maid or a nanny? Given local economic conditions you could live a pretty nice little life for yourself here.

A great deal of recent literature in the Human Resources field has discussed, even debated, the reasoning for your high expense compensation packages. Your companies pay out large sums to get you to come and to keep you here. A year ago a colleague of mine was able to move her family of four and the entire contents of their local home completely at the expense of the U.S. taxpayer. Nice deal!!

Major firms are trying to find ways to cut back on expat compensation while still being able to effectively do business. This is no easy trick when potential field employees sit at the home base and cry about how difficult it would be to be posted in Kazakhstan, how dangerous it will be, how harsh life is in a developing nation – they don't have McDonalds!!!!

My point is that potential expatriates seek extraordinary compensation for quality of life issues that are not always realistic. Further, there has not been adequate evaluation of the need for the current expat lifestyle you enjoy. Given the trend towards compensation package downsizing it looks like the gravy train is pulling out of the station, and it should. Firms are beginning to critically assess what the quality of life level really is and what is a fair and equitable compensation package. Life in the big three “A”s - Astana / Atyrau / Almaty is not all that bad. If you are posted somewhere in the central reaches of this nation then there may be an issue or two for discussion.

Allow me to review three main points:

- 1) Pre departure training, as discussed in the last article is critical, yet so to is repatriation preparation. There is a cost of getting you here and a psychological cost for the stress of returning home. When you live the life of the lazy, fat Westerner after a while going home does not look so attractive. This is not simply an opinion on my part. From a professional standpoint the issue that you need to pay strict attention to is “reverse culture shock”. Does a little research, you'll find it has serious consequences.
- 2) Companies should begin to cut back on paying for expat housing. The rent on an expat flat is far above the local market. Our local hosts tend to believe that ALL foreigners can afford the high prices. I witnessed one situation where a woman accepted a flat at \$150 ABOVE what I had paid for two reasons. First her employer was paying (so why should she or the landlord care?) and two she was been forced out of her other flat that day by her previous landlord. There are potential answers to this situation and they are not complicated.
- 3) Please remember that you, your family, your pet dog sparky, and your company all have a cause and effect relationship with the local community. Lack of expat awareness of the real conditions under which your Kazakhstani colleagues live is a MAJOR complaint that I hear. You live in a very insulated world here. This is true of expatriate communities worldwide. In Washington D.C. the Russian expats live in a compound of their own. People I know there say that the Russians understand little of how Americans really live.

Local perceptions of what you feel and how you act in regard to them is a serious matter and I should much like to hear how you and your firm are addressing this. I may recommend to you that if it all possible the expatriate communities take a hard look at the existence of "expat compounds". Is it possible or feasible not to create walled communities with benefits and quality of life elements dramatically out of step with local conditions, norms and values?

Ladies and Gentlemen, regardless of your position on these topics the one most dangerous element is perception. We need to engage positive interaction across as broad a local population base as possible. In so doing we enrich the experience of the expatriate community, and reinforce positive perceptions of us. Environment has a direct correlation to behaviors. If you focus yourself on experiencing life as they live it and not trying to recreate your home comforts, then going home may be seen more as a transition from one adventure to a previous adventure.

Responsible comments, issues for discussion, questions and observations on doing business in Kazakhstan are always welcome and may be sent to Mr. Wright at:

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