



SHORT-TERM ASSIGNMENTS

Employees on shorter overseas stints are often expected to hit the ground running and deliver results. *HRM* finds out how HR can help them make a seamless transition

Sumathi V Selvaretnam
sumathi@hrmasia.com.sg



Short term assignments continue to increase as a share of business travel.

A report by PwC consultancy found that some 20% of assignments now last less than 12 months, compared with only 10% in 2002.

In Cartus' 2014 *Global Mobility Policy and Practices Survey*, participants were asked how their organisation's international assignments had changed over the previous two years. Some 49% of respondents reported an increase in the number of short-term assignments, shares Kenneth Kwek, Senior Vice President and General Manager – Cartus Asia.

"The reason for the rise in these short-term assignments can be largely attributed to companies looking to plug skills gaps while securing cost containment in today's increasingly connected global marketplace," says T.J. Spencer, Vice President of Sales, Oakwood Worldwide.

So what defines a short-term assignment? According to PwC's *Talent Mobility: 2020 and Beyond* report, the average short-term assignment is usually no longer than 12 months.

However, the length of short-term assignments can depend on a number of factors including the project at hand, budget, and the organisation's needs, says Spencer.

Top employee concerns

While the prospect of an overseas stint brings about much excitement and anticipation for the employee, it is often coupled with some anxieties.

Respondents to the Cartus survey consistently identified personal issues as the top challenge for short-term assignments, in which assignees were expected to accomplish goals quickly, often with less preparation than long-term assignees. They also typically involved more separation from family and familiar networks, says Kwek.

In such situations, assignees might request for more home leave, since short-term assignments can be unaccompanied. They also might have concerns about the tax implications resulting from their work overseas.

"The most important requirement for employees on short term assignments is how to effectively manage their tax exposure, since in many countries you are treated as a tax resident after 183 days," says Gareth Leow, Relocation Service Manager, Santa Fe.

"There was a scenario where an American expatriate who was initially on a permanent transfer assignment in Country A, and was subsequently sent on a short term assignment to Country B. He became liable for taxes in three countries!"

Short-term assignees also need to be assured that the project is part of their professional development, and that the knowledge and experience they gain while on assignment will be valued and utilised on their return, Kwek says.

Employees also appreciate it when their company pays attention to details

CARTUS CASE STUDY

Cross cultural training

An American assignee moved from the UK to Singapore for his third successive assignment. His wife was very happy for the five years they were located in the UK and didn't want to move. As he would be working very long hours on a project, he felt he would not be able to work effectively on assignment if his wife and children, who were very young, did not move with him. After a Cartus cross-cultural training programme was arranged to prepare the whole family for the assignment, his wife was reassured and the whole family settled in very well.

Needless to say the relocation was more effective as the assignee had the support of his family by his side.

such as extra baggage allowances, since relocation policies for short-term assignments may otherwise limit personal effects shipments.

Organisations should further foster an environment that allows assignees to share learnings, tips and experiences on how to settle in comfortably and build connections in the host location, says Spencer. "Support should be provided in the build-up to a move – a preview trip to the prospective location is often beneficial – and once relocation commences, assignees should know who they can contact with any questions."

Feeling at home

Companies offer their assignees different types of accommodation, depending on the type and length of assignment. "If a short-term assignee is moving without their spouse or children, smaller accommodation is typically sourced," says Kwek.

Serviced apartments are often a popular accommodation choice, given the short and unpredictable tenure of such assignments. "In situations

where the assignments end early, short term transferees get to leave the service apartment hassle free without much of a financial penalty, compared to a housing lease with a minimum stay. Should there be situations where employees' assignments go longer than planned, the extension with service apartment accommodation can also be easily arranged," says Leow.

Such apartments also offer a larger room space than hotel rooms, ranging from studios and one-bedroom apartments to three-bedroom apartments. "Serviced apartments typically have separate living and dining areas, so guests can spread out and be more comfortable. Some apartments also have several bedrooms and bathrooms, which is convenient for families," says Spencer.

A fully-equipped kitchen gives guests the option to eat in, and entertain at home. This can minimise out-of-pocket costs as the employee does not have to rely on restaurants or room service, Spencer adds.

According to Spencer, serviced apartments are less likely to face challenges related to high occupancy levels because they can always add and subtract the number of units via supply chain properties. "Unit rates are usually set through long-term contracts, so the rates tend to be steadier for clients than a hotel which might change its rates on a daily basis depending on demand."

Onboarding

An effective onboarding programme can go a long way in helping employees start their assignments off on the right foot.

Santa Fe recommends short term assignees get acquainted through a one-day orientation of the host country. Leow says, "Although they will only be there for six to 12 months, it's not that short of a stay either. Acclimatising is important, even to people on holidays!"

Serviced apartment provider Oakwood, for example, organises various

guest activities, from family outings to the zoo, to wine and cheese tasting parties in the property lounge. "Each activity is tailored to each assignee and their family, while at the same time it provides an opportunity to meet and interact, share stories and insights, and offer support and guidance to the newly-arrived," says Spencer.

Short term assignees will also require assistance with settling in programmes such as bank account set up, registering for mobile phone, and setting up data plans, says Leow.

Cartus offers assignees a dedicated consultant who, in the first instance, will conduct an initiation call and explain the terms of the policy. "This lays the foundation for the relationship going forward as the consultant will support the assignee throughout the life of the assignment," says Kwek. Cartus also offers a short-term assignment support programme that

prepares assignees for managing the unique stresses of a short-term assignment.

Cross-cultural training is a key part of the onboarding process.

"As extended short-term assignments replace long-term assignments for developing key employees, companies risk placing unprepared employees in a foreign business environment," says Kwek.

Cartus has custom-developed cross-cultural training which prepares assignees for dealing with issues that are specific to the cross-border work and living challenges employees they are set to experience. "Providing cross-cultural training prior to the commencement of the assignment will properly prepare the employee for living and working in a different cultural environment, and may help avoid costly missteps on the part of the employee," Kwek says.

Ensuring employee safety

Due to the security risks associated with traveling abroad, it is best practice for companies to employ formalised security processes for their employees when traveling on business or living in another country, says Kwek.

For locations where safety and security are important, Cartus offers tailored security briefings as part of the pre-assignment support package.

"Established security processes should be communicated to the employee pre-departure, upon arrival and on an ongoing basis throughout the life of the assignment," Kwek says.

In certain locations renting ground-floor flats may be unsafe, or the assignee may be required to live in a gated compound. They may require a driver rather than taking public transport, Kwek adds.

TYPICAL SHORT-TERM ASSIGNMENT BENEFITS

Policy	Policy Component	
Pre-assignment support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate assessment • Tax briefing • Immigration assistance • Medical examinations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security briefings • Repayment agreement • Intercultural training • Language training
Assignment compensation and benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Payment of base salary and assignment allowances • Per diem or cost of living allowance • Host country housing • Host transportation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hardship allowance • Employee benefits (medical, retirement and pension) • Vacation, working hours, and public holidays
Relocation support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home country housing • Shipment of personal effects • Travel to the host country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporary living • Miscellaneous expense allowance (MEA)
Ongoing assignment support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Settling-in assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home leave
Contingencies and special circumstances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal emergency leave 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency evacuation
End of assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repatriation integration programs • Departure assistance • Shipment of personal effects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return travel expenses • Repatriation miscellaneous expense allowance (MEA)
Tax assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tax policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tax return preparation

Source: Cartus