As the final stage in the overseas relocation process, repatriation is a critical, yet unfortunately often forgotten chapter, of the assignment cycle. Yet, companies generally have made little progress in formalizing steps to improve repatriation policies.

With potentially high attrition rates amongst repatriated employees, a comprehensive repatriation policy is a vital tool in retaining key talent and maximizing valuable skills gained while on assignment. According to Cartus’ 2016 Trends in Global Relocation Survey, 56% of responding companies said that they did not offer formal Repatriation Integration programs, although ironically, 47% of respondents in the same survey rated repatriation among aspects of their relocation programs they most want to improve.

Many companies choose to deal with repatriation services on an ad-hoc basis instead of using a definitive policy. The length and location of the assignment often correlates with the extent of repatriation services offered (e.g., if a British assignee is sent to the United States, they may perhaps be repatriated with less support than if they had returned from Asia or the Middle East). However, due to the importance of retaining talent and the potential for reverse culture shock regardless of regions, companies should always consider the value of repatriation services, despite fixed length of time or location.

**Typical Components of Repatriation Policies**

Repatriation policies typically feature benefits that are often a subset of those services offered to the assignee and their family during their expatriation. These benefits vary based on short- and long-term assignments and the seniority of the assignee. For a long-term assignment, these would typically include:

- Shipment & household goods
- Temporary accommodation
- Home-finding services back in the home location
- Departure assistance
- Repatriation allowance

**Repatriation Challenges**

Repatriation is more than simply “bringing someone back” to the same office or location as they were in previously. The whole experience will have affected their quality of life, their aspirations, their motivations for working and, fundamentally, their psychological contract. Assignees return as more developed individuals and may not easily fit into the role they embodied before.

Many families struggle from reverse culture shock, especially when they have been abroad for a long time. It is also increasingly common for companies to repatriate assignees to their home country, but not to their original hometown. This can cause considerable stress for all family members, since the country is familiar but their hometown familiarity and support infrastructure no longer exist. To have the desired impact, repatriation policies must address the specific concerns of the assignee and their family in a meaningful way.
Specific repatriation issues also exist in certain countries due to labor and demographic trends: as one example, the case of Indian and Chinese “returnees.” These are individuals who have lived and raised their families abroad and are brought home to take roles in the company, which is hoping to capitalize on the knowledge they gained abroad. From the employer’s view, the families are repatriating to a familiar home location. However, for the families, who have adjusted to their host culture so deeply, the perspective of home and host culture has changed and they may, in fact, be suffering from culture shock as severe as if they were in a completely foreign location.

Even with the goal to facilitate the growth and retention of a repatriating employee, 78% of respondents to Cartus’ 2016 Trends in Global Relocation Survey did not track the percentage of assignees who left the company within two years of returning home – an indication that there is much to do in this area if companies hope to capitalize on assignment expertise and truly reinforce their talent pool.

Boosting ROI Through Talent Management

With high potential attrition rates amongst repatriated employees during the first year of repatriation, organizations can quickly experience a loss in investment made in their employees to bring valuable experience and international skills to their organizations—and frequently, those employees go on to take those benefits to the competition.

For both employees and organizations to realize a positive result from global assignments, companies must take additional steps to develop, reward, and retain their talent. According to a recent Cartus survey* results, the top three tasks considered for measuring the connections among the success of the assignment, the repatriation, and the employee’s advancement thereafter are:

- Looking at succession planning early
- Adopting a formal leadership process
- Increasing focus on candidate preparedness

Best Practice Tips

Allowing repatriation to seem like an afterthought in a relocation program can lead to the employee leaving soon after returning home and the organization failing to achieve a return on investment from the costs incurred and time spent on international assignment. Studies have shown that the retention of repatriated assignees is linked to their ability to identify, articulate, and apply the new skills they have learned.

* Cartus 2015 Biggest Challenges Survey
Recommendations and best practice tips for successful repatriation that many companies are putting into practice include taking steps before, during, and after the assignment to reinforce ties to the company and maximize the assignee’s ability to use his or her knowledge on return.

- Mentors at home location during duration of assignment
- Discussion on repatriation at least 6 months before it happens
- Career discussion at the onset of the assignment
- More focused career discussions within six to 12 months of the end of the assignment
- Focused networking and HR/business conversations during home-leave trips
- Assistance for spouse/partner to find employment at home (providing they want to work on return)
- Retention allowance as long as they stay with the company for 2 years
- Repat programs for family

For more information on repatriation support and practices, contact consultingsolutions@cartus.com.