

The Challenges of International Assignments

Scientific article

UDC 331.556.46

KEY WORDS: international assignment, phases, expatriates, repatriation, culture shock, reverse culture shock

ABSTRACT - In today's business environment, more and more companies decide to spread their activities abroad seeking for the opportunity to enhance their business results. Although the level of internationalization of these activities could be different, performing many of them require that the employees from the parent company leave the headquarters of the company for some time. In other words, some employees are given international assignments. International assignments are usually seen as a process which consists of several phases. The most comprehensive view is that this process consists of three phases: pre-assignment phase, assignment phase and post-assignment phase. Each phase has its own specificities and challenges and requires adequate activities of the human resource management (HRM) department. Successful managing of each phase is the precondition for an international assignment success. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to address and analyse the most important challenges of each phase as well to address some of HRM practices in order to effectively manage these assignments.

Znanstveni prispevek

UDK 331.556.46

KLJUČNE BESEDE: delo v tujini, faze, izseljenec, vrnitev v domovino, kulturni šok, obratni kulturni šok

POVZETEK - Vse več podjetij se v današnjem času odloča, da svojo dejavnost razširijo v tujino, tako da iščejo priložnosti, ki lahko izboljšajo njihov poslovni rezultat. Čeprav je lahko raven internacionalizacije teh dejavnosti različna, morajo zaposleni zapustiti matično podjetje za nekaj časa, da lahko opravljajo delo. Povedano drugače, nekateri zaposleni dobijo delo v tujini. Delo v tujini je običajno proces, ki je sestavljen iz več faz. Na splošno velja, da ima ta proces tri faze: pred odhodom v tujino, delo v tujini, po odhodu v tujino. Vsaka faza ima svoje posebnosti in izzive ter zahteva ustrezne aktivnosti oddelka za upravljanje človeških virov (HRM). Uspešno izvajanje vsake faze je predpogoj za uspešno delo v tujini. Zato je namen tega prispevka obravnavati in analizirati najpomembnejše izzive posameznih faz ter obravnavati nekatere prakse upravljanja človeških virov, da bi lahko učinkovito opravljali delo v tujini.

1 Introduction

In today's globalised business environment, in order to improve business results, more and more companies decide to internationalise their operations. According to the United Nations, the estimations in 2010 were more than 82,000 large multinational companies with more than 81,000 affiliates worldwide, in which more than 77 million people were employed (World Investment Report, 2010). These numbers change every day since more and more companies expand their operations abroad. The main factors which contribute to the increasing internationalisation of business are seeking new markets, rapid and extensive global communication, rapid development and transfer of new technology, increased migration, knowledge sharing, e-commerce, homogenisation of culture and consumer demands, etc. (Briscoe et al., 2012).

The internationalisation of business influences many aspects of the companies' functioning. It also has significant effects on the HRM department and its practices.

Many traditional HRM practices in the international context have to be redesigned and adapted to the specific features of the foreign environment in which the companies have operations or entities. Geographic dispersion, multiculturalism, different legal and social systems, cross-border movement of the employees, etc. (Briscoe et al., 2012), are some of the challenges that the HRM department in internationalised companies has to face.

One of the biggest challenges that the HRM department faces in the international business environment is the effective management of international assignments. This activity within the field of HRM is very complex, since it requires many specific practices in each phase of the international assignment process. In addition, every phase has its own specific challenges (potential culture shock, reverse culture shock, premature returning to parent country, etc.), which the HRM department has to prevent or deal with effectively. The importance of effectively managing international assignments could be seen from the fact that in the case of international assignment failure companies may lose significant financial resources. According to Reynolds (1997), expatriates are very costly employees who may cost employers, on average, 2-5 times more than home country counterpart workers. In addition, if the expatriates leave the company after they return to the parent company, that companies will lose not only the financial resources but valuable human capital as well.

Having in mind all these facts, the purpose of this paper is to address the most important challenges that the HRM department faces in each phase of the international assignment process, as well as to address the most important practices whose implementation could prevent some of the aforementioned problems or, at least, to minimise their negative effects. The paper is theoretical and consists of two parts. In the first part, the possible purposes of international assignments are explained, and in the second, the phases of the international assignment process are analysed. In the conclusion, some recommendations for the HRM department in internationalised companies are made in order to manage effectively this type of assignments.

2 The Purposes of International Assignments

In the companies which are internationalised their activities, international assignments are a usual form for performing some activities abroad. Although there are many forms of international assignments, long-term temporary assignments are the most complex ones. This type of international assignment typically last from one to three years (though it may extend to five years or more). In addition, this type of assignments might require reallocation of the entire family (Crown World Mobility, January 2013).

When it comes to the motives of sending employees abroad, the authors agree that these motives could be different. According to Baruch et al. (2002), the objectives of international assignments are threefold. The first is the transfer of knowledge in subsidiaries, the second is the career development of employees by gaining international

experience and the third is gaining control over the operations abroad as well as keeping the subsidiaries in line with the company's directions.

According to Edström and Galbraith (1977), there are also three motives why the international transfer of expatriates occurs. The first is filling the positions, the second is management development and the third motive is organisational development. Filling the positions is the motive for the international transfer of expatriates in the situation where qualified local citizens are not available. Therefore, companies expect that through expatriates the subsidiaries will get the necessary technical and managerial knowledge.

Usually, this motive is the primary one when subsidiaries are located in developing countries, but, as some authors pointed out, specific knowledge transfer might be necessary for subsidiaries in developed countries as well (Rieche, Harzing 2008). Management development is the second motive why international transfers occur. In this case, it is expected that managers will develop their competencies by gaining the international experience and become willing to take important tasks in the future in subsidiaries abroad or in the parent company. It is important to note that this type of transfer will occur even if the qualified host-country citizens are available. The third motive for international assignments, according to Edström and Galbraith (1977), is organisational development. The international transfer in this case occurs when the organisation's aim is to make both expatriates and local managers integrate into the corporate culture, as well as when the aim of the transfer is the creation or improvement communication channels between subsidiaries and headquarters (Edström and Galbraith, 1977).

3 The Process of an International Assignment

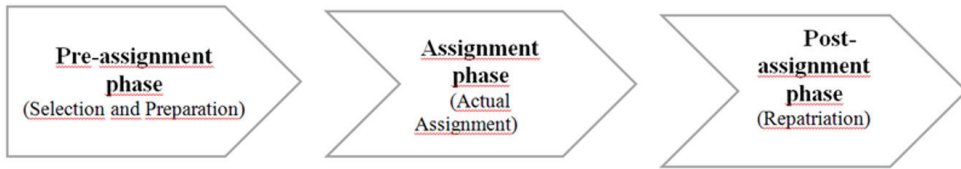
Many authors who researched the nature of international assignments suggest that this process consist of several stages.

According to Solomon (1995), the international assignment programme is a circular process which begins with the selection of candidates, followed by cross-culture preparation, global career management, the completion of international business objectives, and ends with repatriation.

According to Konivuori (2005), this process consists of ten phases: interest towards international assignment, decision to apply, offer from the employer, accepted or turned down, pre-departure arrangements, move, getting to terms with the host culture, becoming efficient in the host culture, decision to finish/continue/localise, arrangements according to decision, return/new assignment/localisation and readjustment period.

However, all these phases, formulated more or less analytically, could be summarised into three main phases: pre-assignment phase, actual assignment and post-assignment phase (Bonache et al., 2001).

Figure 1: The phase of the international assignment process



Source: Reiche, B. S. and Harzing, A. W. (2008). International assignments. In: Harzing, W. K. and Pinnington, A. (eds.). *International Human Resource Management* (3rd ed.). Sage: London and Bonache, J., Brewster, C., Suutari, V. (2001). *Expatriation: A developing research agenda*. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, 43, No. 1.

3.1 Pre-Assignment Phase

The first phase of the international assignment process is called the pre-assignment phase. The crucial activities in this phase that the HRM department has to perform are the selection of employees to whom the international tasks will be assigned, and the employees' preparation for these assignments.

Many studies confirmed that the selection of expatriates is a multidimensional issue. Since the cultural environment in which expatriates will operate usually differs from the cultural environment in their parent country, besides technical competencies, the expatriates need to possess many cross-cultural abilities. Cross-cultural abilities could be seen as a specific cluster which constitutes competencies such as: cultural empathy, adaptability, diplomacy, knowledge of the foreign language, positive attitudes, emotional stability, etc.

One of the first studies conducted in this field is the study by Tung (1981). According to her, there are four groups of variables that contribute to the success or failure of expatriates and, accordingly, these variables should be used in the selection process. The variables are as follows (Tung, 1981):

- Technical competencies for the job. First of all, expatriates should be technically competent. According to Rieche and Harzing, technical competencies are even more important for international assignees because expatriates are located at some distance from headquarters and cannot consult their superiors or co-workers when they have a dilemma or problem related to the job (Rieche, Harzing 2008). In addition, Vance and Paik pointed out that this criterion is based on the notion that past behavior is a strong predictor of future performance (Vance, Paik 2006). Consequently, it is natural that expatriates should primarily be technically competent for an international assignment.
- Personal traits of relational abilities. As Tung (1991) pointed out, personal traits or relational abilities refers to the ability of the individual to establish effectively relations with his/her superiors, peers, subordinates, clients, etc. In the literature, there is an agreement that these abilities are very important for expatriates' success since they reflect, not just their knowledge about the foreign culture, but also the ability to "live and work with people whose value systems, beliefs, customs,

manners and ways of conducting business may greatly differ from one's own" (Rieche, Harzing 2008).

- Ability to cope with environmental variables. Since the political, legal and socio-economic systems which constitute the macroenvironment in the host country may differ significantly from such systems in the parent country, this ability is also important for the success of an international assignment.
- Family situation. This criterion is very important because in many cases the inability of family to adjust to the foreign environment was the crucial factor which caused the failure of the expatriate in the form of premature returning to the parent country. This problem is particularly complex if the partner has had to give up his/her job (Rieche, Harzing 2008).

Although these variables/criteria should be used in the selection process, the practice often shows different situations. The selection process of many companies mostly relies on technical competencies, since interpersonal and cross-cultural competencies are difficult to identify or measure. In addition, by using technical competencies as the criterion for selection, selectors try to minimise their personal risk and select a candidate who might have lower performance comparing to the required one (Bonache et al., 2001).

On the other hand, Brewster (1991) notes a completely opposite situation in which the selection of expatriates is based only on personal recommendation from line managers or HR specialists (Brewster 1991). Knowing these facts, Harris and Brewster (1999) developed specific typology of international managers' selection systems. According to them, there are several selection systems, such as open and closed systems, as well as formal and informal selection systems. In their practical research, they found that the closed/informal system was the most frequent one that the companies they studied implemented. This system in the literature, in the accordance to the title of their paper, is known as "the coffee-machine system" (Harris, Brewster, 1999). Since in this type of selection system candidates are not evaluated based on the requirements of the international task, there is a big probability for international assignment failure.

As it was earlier said, during the pre-assignment phase the second important issue is expatriates' preparation for an international assignment. The preparation of expatriates is very important, since it may significantly influence the success of the overall international assignment. Generally speaking, organising the training programmes for employees is the traditional activity of the HRM department. However, when international assignments are on the line, this activity is especially important and has many specific features (Ehnert, Brewster 2008):

- The employees who are going abroad have to adjust not only to a new job and work role, but to a new culture as well;
- Before going overseas, many cultural and behavioral norms could not be predicted, and therefore, the employees might need additional help;
- If an employee's family also travels, it is desirable to include them in training programmes as well,

- Since the employees' adjustment after they return to the parent country is often a problem, the preparation for their return is also needed.

During the phase of preparation for the assignment, the aim of the training is to provide employees with the basic language knowledge (if it is necessary), as well as to introduce them the cultural and behavioral norms of the host country. However, the scope and nature of preparation is influenced by many factors, such as (Rieche, Harzing 2008): the individual's cultural background, culture-specific features of the host-country environment, the individual's degree of contact with the host environment, the assignment length, the individual's family situation, and the individual's language skills. In this phase, the following training methods could be implemented: informal briefings, look-see visits, computer-based training, etc. (Ehnert, Brewster 2008).

Adequate preparation programmes will provide, according to Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991), the so-called anticipatory adjustment. Although the anticipatory adjustment is also influenced by previous international experience, cross-cultural preparation is vital for building up realistic expectations and is the foundation for the international assignment success.

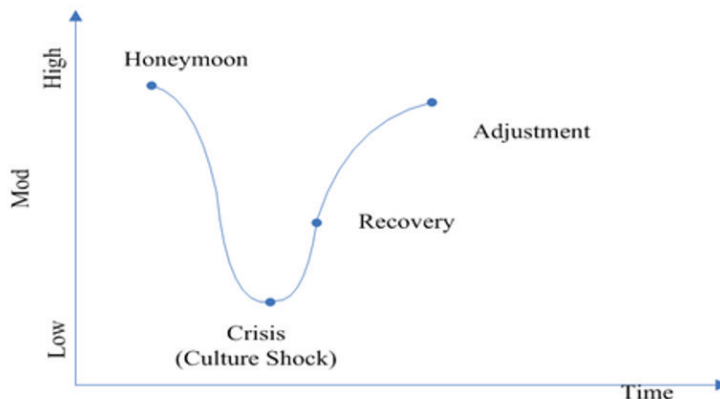
3.2 Actual Assignment

The actual assignment phase is the phase in which the international task is accomplished. This phase also has its own specific features. Although international assignments could create many possibilities for the employees, such as career development, developing global competencies, higher wages, etc., they also bring many difficulties in the form of stress and uncertainty (Rieche, Harzing 2008). Employees also need a period of adaptation, which could be more or less complex.

The most known model in the literature which describes the process of expatriates' adaptation to the foreign environment is the model developed by Oberg (1960). His model consists of the following four phases: honeymoon, culture shock, recovery and adjustment. Honeymoon is the first phase of this process and usually lasts from several days to several weeks. In this phase, expatriates, as Pederson said, feel more like tourists than expatriates; they are intrigued and curious about everything that is different from what they are used to in their parent country (Pedersen, 1995 cit. Nikolaeva, 2010). However, after this period, some expatriates may experience negative emotions, since everything they find interesting, can become irritating. This phase is called culture shock. According to Oberg, there are six main emotions the individuals experience due to culture shock: stress, a sense of loss, a sense of becoming an outcast, confusion, feelings of surprise and anxiety and a sense of powerlessness (Oberg, 1960). Recovery is the next phase of expatriates' adaptation and starts when employees begin dealing with their emotions and try to create a positive attitude towards people and the general environment of the host country. They accept that they have problems with the adaptation and start asking for help their co-workers (Oberg, 1960). The final phase in the Oberg's model is adjustment. This phase is a natural consequence of the fact that expatriates started accepting and adapting to the new environment in the previous

phase (Nikolaeva, 2010). In this phase, expatriates are ready to demonstrate their full potential and justify the expectations the company has.

Figure 2: Obreg's phases of adaptation



Source: Nikolaeva, G. T. (2010). *The challenges of Expatriation & Repatriation*. Bachelor Thesis. Retrieved on 5/25/2014 from the Internet: http://pure.au.dk/portal/files/11038/the_challenges_of_expatriation_and_repatriation.pdf

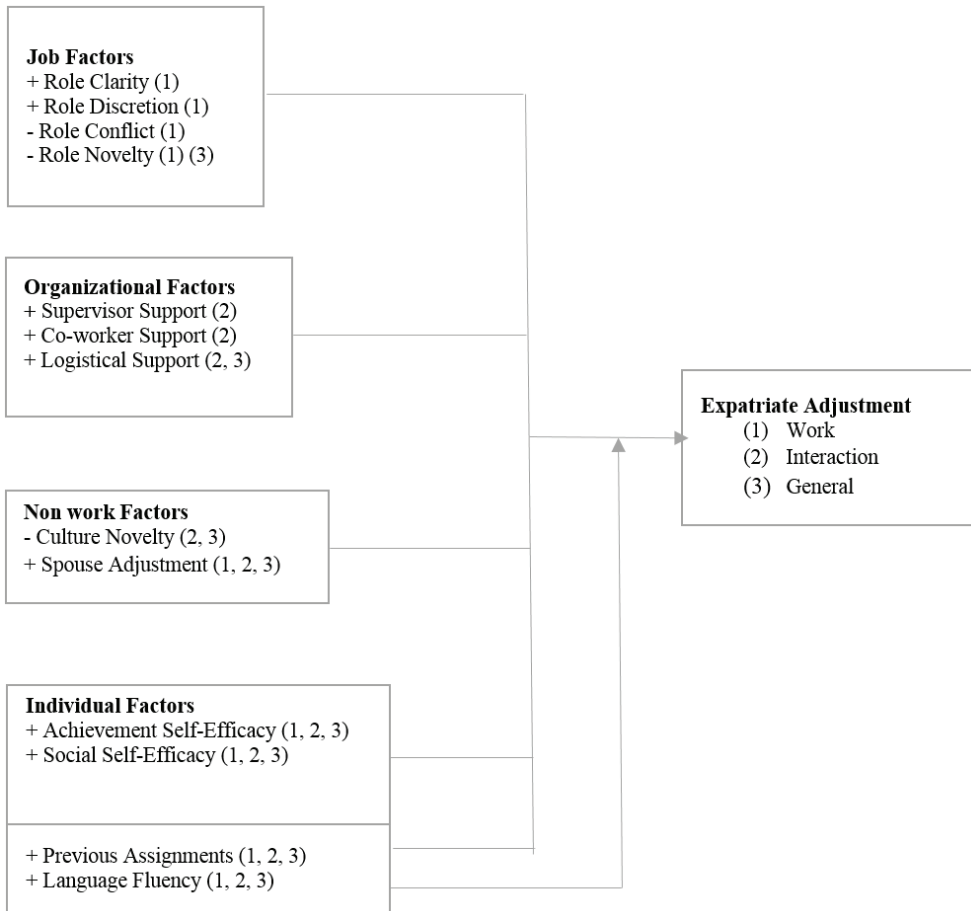
The question that arises here is as follows: “Is culture shock unavoidable?” The answer is no. In other words, culture shock in some cases does not even occur. Those cases are connected with at least two situations: (a) cross-cultural preparation was done well, and (b) cultural distance between the parent and host country is small.

Since the process of adaptation influences the performance of expatriates (during culture shock they are usually significantly below the required level), it is important to identify the main factors that influence the flow of this process. Knowing and managing those factors could prevent numerous problems during the process. In this regard, one of the most comprehensive models of expatriates' adjustment determinants is the model of Rieche and Harzing, which is created upon the work of Black et al. 1991 and Shaffer et al. 1999. Their model is presented in the Figure 3.

According to the model, expatriate adjustment consists of three components: work adjustment, interactional adjustment and general adjustment. All these forms of adjustment are influenced by specific factors. For example, work adjustment is influenced by the role clarity, role discretion, previous assignments, language fluency, the achievement of self-efficacy and culture novelty. All these variables have positive influence on work adjustment except culture novelty.

Interactional adjustment is influenced by organisational factors, such as supervisors' support, co-workers' support, logistical support, and several individual factors, such as the achievement of self-efficacy, social self-efficacy, previous experience due to assignments and language fluency. Within the non-work variables, the importance lies in culture novelty and spouse adjustment. All the variables, except culture novelty, have positive influence on the adjustment.

Figure 3: Determinants of expatriate adjustment



Source: Reiche B. S. and Harzing, A. W. (2008). International assignments. In: Harzing, W. K. and Pinnington, A. (eds.), *International Human Resource Management* (3rd ed.). Sage: London, based on work of Black et al. (1991) and Shaffer et al. (1999).

*Numbers in parentheses indicate the corresponding dependent variables

Finally, general adjustment is influenced, according to the model, mostly by individual and non-work factors and, to some degree, by logistical support. All these factors have positive influence on employees' adjustment.

Knowing the nature of the influence of some factors (positive vs. negative) on the adjustment of employees should be served as the guidelines for the HRM department how to manage effectively international assignments in general.

3.3 Post-Assignment Phase

The post-assignment phase is the phase in which expatriates return to the parent country and try to readjust to the environment they left due to the international assi-

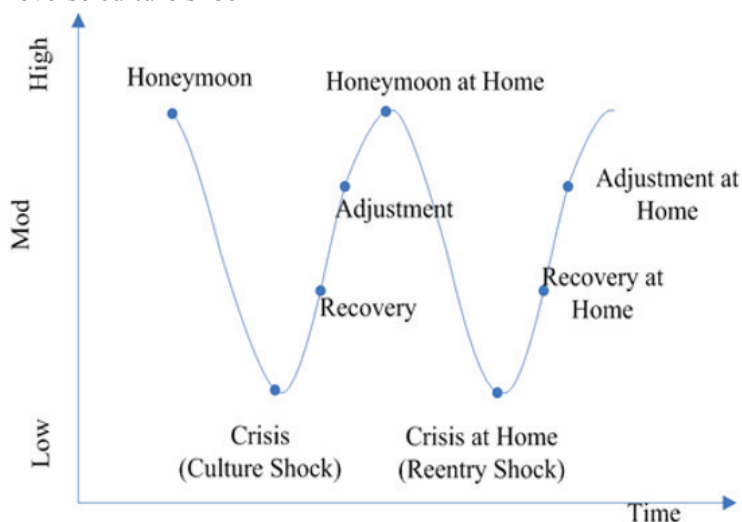
gment. In the literature, this phase is also known as repatriation and the employees who return to the parent company and country are called repatriates. Many believe that this phase of the international assignment process involves no difficulties, since the repatriates return to the familiar environment. In that sense, Hurn (1999) listed the most common expectations that repatriates have:

- I do not need professional help with repatriation. I am going home, therefore no problems.
- Everything will be basically the same as when I left.
- I will be better off financially when I return home.
- I expect some form of promotion on returning home as I will be able to apply what I have learned abroad.
- My organisation will value my new skills, experiences and contacts.

However, in many cases, the return of employees back to the parent company and country causes negative feelings, such as anxiety, uncertainty and disappointment. After returning, repatriates may experience the loss of status, autonomy, the loss of career direction or a feeling that international experience they gained is underestimated (Inkson et al., 1997). In addition, if they face significant changes in their environment after returning to the parent company and countries, they may experience the so-called reverse culture shock.

In the literature, the concept of reverse culture shock is introduced by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963). Their work is based on the concept of the culture shock introduced by Organ (1960). Somehow, the reverse culture shock is the extension of the culture shock (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Reverse culture shock



Source: Based on Oberg (1960) and Gullahorn, J. T., Gullahorn, J. E. (1963). Retrieved 5/25/2014 from the Internet: <http://myerasmusblog.blogspot.se/2009/08/international-culture-communication.html>.

The authors mostly agree that this kind of shock can be even severer than cultural shock. The reason is that expatriates are somewhat prepared for the fact that the foreign environment will be different and that they will face many unfamiliar situations (Gaw, 2000). On the contrary, when they return to the parent company, they expect a familiar environment and familiar situations. However, in some cases, the company can change significantly (strategy, leadership, culture, etc.), which requires from them to readjust to the changed environment.

If employees cannot readjust after returning to the parent company, one of the consequences is that they may leave the company. A great deal of evidence shows a substantial turnover of expatriates when returning to the home country. The surveys suggest that 10-25% of expatriates leave their company within one year after they return to the home country (Black, Gregersen 1999), and from a quarter to a third of repatriates leave their firms within two years of returning (Suutari, Brewster 2000).

The repatriate turnover, however, has negative influence on companies. As said previously, they may lose substantial financial resources. There is also the risk of their investment being transferred to direct competitors (Rieche, Harzing 2008). In addition, the company loses its human capital. Finally, the turnover is likely to have negative implications for the willingness of other workers to accept an international assignment (Kamoche, 1997), since their colleagues have problems in readjustment.

Having in mind that difficulties in the repatriation phase could have negative effects for the companies (and employees), many authors tried to identify the most important factors which influence the success of the process of readjustment. In this regard, Vidal et al. (2007), based on the work of many authors, identified several factors that influence the adjustment process and, among them, the most important are (Vidal et al., 2007):

- Time spent abroad. When it deals with the duration of the assignment, it has been argued that the longer expatriates are abroad, the greater the difficulties they will face when they return to the parent company. However, some research indicated that expatriates with better international experience adjust better after returning to the parent company due to the familiarity to the experience they previously gained.
- The self-efficacy. One of the factors which some authors identified as a factor which can influence the readjustment process. According to them, self-efficacy refers to the attitude that employees bring to the process of attempting to overcome problems related to the repatriation process. Therefore, it is likely that expatriates with higher self-efficacy will adjust easier after repatriation than the individuals with lower levels.
- Expectations. The important factor which may influence the success of the repatriation process is the expectation with regard to the work and the company after returning to the parent company. It is expected that if expatriates have accurate expectations, the uncertainty with regard to their work and status is reduced, and it is likely that the readjustment process will be more successful. These expectations are usually developed long before expatriates come back home, and as Stroh et

al. (1998) pointed out, sometimes these expectations are developed even before expatriates leave the home country due to the foreign assignment. All these expectations could also be seen as part of their psychological contract, since they represent what expatriates believe they will get from the employer in exchange for their international engagement (Stroh et al. 1998). If these expectations are met, meaning that their psychological contract is fulfilled, it can be expected that these expatriates will be committed after returning to the parent country, the turnover rate will decrease, their performance will be at the proper level, etc. If the aforementioned expectations are not met, their psychological contract will be broken and many negative consequences may arise (decreased motivation, performance, leaving the company, etc.).

In order to reduce the risk of the repatriate turnover, the companies should create and implement adequate short-term and long-term HR practices (Rieche, Harzing 2008). The aim of these programmes is to prepare employees for any changes that have taken place in the company in the meantime. In addition, repatriation programmes should contain counseling about career development in order to achieve win-win situation in which both employees and organisations will be satisfied.

4 Conclusion

This paper deals with the international assignment process and challenges that may arise in each phase of the process. Since the failure of the international assignment could be very costly for companies, this process requires adequate planning and prediction of the problems that could arise in each phase. Consequently, the HRM department has many responsibilities and many important activities to perform when business needs require sending the employees abroad for some period of time.

The most important activities in the pre-assignment phase are the selection of employees who will perform international tasks. Due to the consequences of selecting the wrong person could result in poor performance, premature returning to the parent company, disturbed relations with foreign clients, etc., it is very important to select the adequate person. However, the first step before selection is defining the adequate selection criteria. It is important to note that those criteria should be in line with the requirements of the job. First of all, technical competencies should be in the focus, since expatriates will perform activities located away from the headquarters of the company. Consequently, they might perform many activities that they did not perform at the parent company, as well as they will have limited opportunities for asking for help or advice. However, since employees will carry out these activities in the foreign environment, cross-cultural competencies are also necessary.

After the selection of employees for an international assignment, it is necessary to provide adequate preparation for them. The main purpose of that preparation is to prevent potential cultural shock, which is, at the same time, the main challenge of the next phase of the international assignment process – assignment phase. If the prepara-

tion was not done well or if there was not any preparation at all, it will be very likely for culture shock to occur. As individuals experience stress, a sense of loss, confusion, anxiety, etc. during this phase of the adjustment process, their performance also suffers. Therefore, companies, and especially the HRM department, have responsibility to organise adequate preparation of employees for this kind of assignment. The main aim of that preparation is to develop cross-cultural competencies which are not adequately developed (for example, knowledge of the foreign language, cultural empathy, tolerance for ambiguity etc.).

The final phase of the international assignment process is post-assignment phase. This phase also brings some challenges. After returning, repatriates may experience the loss of status, autonomy, the loss of career direction or a feeling that their international experience is underestimated. If the company has significantly changed in the meantime, they may also experience reverse culture shock. In addition, they may choose to leave the company due to dissatisfaction about their treatment. In that regard, the paper stresses that adequate short-term and long-term HR practices should be implemented in order to reduce the risk of the repatriate turnover or poorer performance due to dissatisfaction. Short-term practices are connected with the repatriate's adequate preparation to return home, and the long-term practices should integrate international assignments into the individual's career path.

Dr. Biljana Djordjević

Izzivi pri izvajanju mednarodnih delovnih nalog

V sodobnem poslovnem okolju številna podjetja iščejo priložnost za izboljšanje učinkovitosti s širitvijo svojih dejavnosti zunaj države. Čeprav je stopnja internacionalizacije dejavnosti lahko različna, od občasnega do rednega izvoza, od odpiranja prodajnih mest do odpiranja podružnic proizvodnje v svoji lasti, je skoraj nemogoče, da ne bi za dokončanje nekaterih (mednarodnih) nalog posamezni zaposleni s sedeža podjetja več ali manj časa preživeli v tujini. To dejstvo istočasno nalaga funkciji upravljanja s človeškimi viri (HRM) posebne naloge in postopke, ki jih mora izvesti, da bi se take delovne obveznosti uspešno izvedle.

Mednarodne delovne naloge, ki se zaupajo zaposlenim, običajno razumemo kot proces, sestavljen iz več stopenj. Pri tem imajo različni avtorji bolj ali manj analitičen pristop in v zvezi s tem navajajo tudi različno število teh stopenj. Vendar pa ta proces najbolj strnjeno lahko opazujemo v treh stopnjah, ki smo jih tudi analizirali v tem prispevku. To so: a) predhodna stopnja - pred mednarodno nalogo, b) stopnja, na kateri se izvede naloga na mednarodni ravni in c) stopnja po zaključku mednarodne naloge. Vsaka od zgoraj navedenih stopenj je specifična in zato zahteva ustrezni nabor dejavnosti HRM.

Pomen učinkovitega upravljanja z izvedbo mednarodnih nalog izhaja iz dejstva, da lahko napaka pri izvedbi organizacijo zelo veliko stane, tako v finančnem kot tudi nefinančnem smislu, če so delavci po vrnitvi iz tujine nezadovoljni s svojim statusom in zapustijo organizacijo. Zato so v prispevku preučene morebitne težave v vsaki od teh faz pri izvajanju mednarodnih nalog, da bi vnaprej razvili ustrezne dejavnosti HRM, s katerimi bi te težave preprečili ali zmanjšali njihove negativne učinke.

V prispevku je poudarjeno, da sta ključni aktivnosti na prvi stopnji pri upravljanju izvajanju mednarodnih nalog izbor kandidatov, ki jim bodo zaupane mednarodne naloge, in njihova priprava za delo in bivanje v tujini. Ko gre za izbor, poudarjamo, da je to večdimenzionalni problem ob upoštevanju posebnosti naloge, ki jo je treba opraviti. V literaturi se avtorji večinoma strinjajo, da je primarno merilo pri izbiri vezano na strokovno usposobljenost zaposlenih in da za to obstaja več razlogov: prvič, tehnična usposobljenost in uspešnost zaposlenega v preteklosti je lahko dober pokazatelj za njegovo prihodnjo dejavnost, drugič, glede na to, da se delo opravlja zunaj sedeža podjetja, imajo zastopniki v tujini omejene možnosti, da poiščejo nasvet ali pomoč, ko se soočajo z nekaterimi težavami. Ti zastopniki morajo biti zelo široko usposobljeni v tehničnem smislu, saj pogosto opravljajo v tujini veliko širši spekter dejavnosti kot na sedežu družbe. Vendar pa, ko delovne naloge opravljajo v tujini, morajo zaposleni poleg nesporne tehnične usposobljenosti imeti tudi ustrezne medkulturne kompetence (znanje jezikov, kulturno empatijo, čustveno stabilnost itd.), kar zahteva, da so tudi ta merila vključena v izbirni postopek.

Po izbirnem postopku zaposlenih mora HRM za njih organizirati ustrezen program priprave za delo in bivanje v tujini. Izkazalo se je, da je usposabljanje predstavnikov za delo v tujini večinoma bolj obširno kot usposabljanje zaposlenih, ki opravljajo dejavnost v matični družbi, in sicer iz več razlogov: prvič, predstavniki v tujini se morajo prilagoditi ne samo novi zaposlitvi in novi vlogi, temveč tudi novi kulturi, drugič, veliko kulturnih norm in običajev ni vedno mogoče predvideti, zato zaposleni v tujini pogosto potrebujejo dodatno pomoč, tretjič, če delavec v tujino vzame tudi svojo družino, je priporočljivo, da se tudi ona vključi v usposabljanje, in četrtič, pogosto se pojavlja problem prilagajanja zaposlenih po vrnitvi iz tujine, zato so potrebne tudi priprave za vrnitev v domovino. Raziskava je pokazala, da vsebina usposabljanja oseba za mednarodne naloge ni nujno enaka za vse zaposlene, treba je namreč upoštevati tudi določene posebne dejavnike, kot so predhodno znanje, ki ga ima zaposleni o državi, v katero odhaja, in njeni kulturi, poznavanje jezika, pogostost stika z lokalnim prebivalstvom, čas mednarodnega sodelovanja, družinske razmere itd.

Druga faza izvajanju mednarodnih nalog je faza, v kateri se opravijo naloge, pri čemer so lahko te naloge različne narave in trajajo različno dolgo. Eden največjih izzivov, s katerimi se zaposleni lahko srečajo na tej stopnji, je kulturni šok. Ta se pogosto obravnava kot sestavni del celotnega procesa prilagajanja zaposlenih delu in življenju v tujini, če postanejo delavci (po običajni začetni evforiji in navdušenju) zmedeni ali celo vznemirjeni zaradi določenih kulturnih norm v tuji državi na eni strani in na drugi strani občutek osamljenosti, nemoči itd. Vendar želimo poudariti, da ta faza v procesu prilagajanja ni ni nujna in se ji je mogoče izogniti z ustreznim medkulturnim

usposabljanjem. Tudi kulturni šok ni nujni pojav, zlasti če gre za posel v državah, ki so kulturno blizu matični. Ker zaposleni, medtem ko so v fazi kulturnega šoka, običajno ne zagotavljajo zadostne zmogljivosti, je v interesu organizacij, da se izognejo tej fazi (ali da se čim bolj skrajša), to pa je mogoče doseči s pravilnim izborom zaposlenih in njihovo ustrezno pripravo.

Glede na pomen uspešnega prilagajanja zaposlenih delu in življenju v tujini so mnogi avtorji preučevali ključne dejavnike, ki vplivajo na ta proces, da bi se pozitivni učinek določenih dejavnikov čim bolj izkoristil, če pa obstajajo negativni dejavniki, da bi se njihov učinek izničil. V zvezi s tem je v prispevku predstavljen model, ki lahko služi strokovnjakom na področju upravljanja s človeškimi viri, da bodo pripravili ustrezen seznam izkušenj za učinkovito upravljanje z delavci, ki imajo mednarodne obveznosti. V tem modelu smo začeli z idejo, da je prilagajanje zaposlenih, ki živijo in delajo v tujini, sestavljeno iz treh segmentov: prilagajanje delu, prilagajanje v interakcijah s pripadniki države gostiteljice in splošno prilagajanje.

Ker se je izkazalo, da na prilagoditev delu v tujini pozitivno vpliva jasnost vloge, ki naj bi jo zaposleni opravljali, in njihova diskrecijska pravica, da nekatere dejavnosti izvajajo po lastni presoji, da pa nanjo negativno vpliva konfliktnost vloge in tudi novosti pri delu, ki jo prinaša vloga, zato bi treba v skladu s temi dejstvi načrtovati tudi vsebino dela zaposlenih, ki so jim naloge zaupane. Ker se je izkazalo, da je znanje jezika, sposobnost za vzpostavitev kakovostnih socialnih interakcij z okoljem in tudi samozaupanje, da bo naloga uspešno opravljena, v pozitivni korelaciji s prilagajanjem delu, je treba oblikovati taka merila za izbor, ki bodo omogočila, da izberejo kandidate, ki bodo najbolj ustrezali zgornjim zahtevam.

Ko gre za prilagajanje na področju interakcije z lokalnim prebivalstvom, se je pokazalo, da na kakovost teh interakcij vpliva ustrezna podpora organizacije, podpora sodelavcev, pa tudi niz individualnih dejavnikov, kot so: sposobnost za vzpostavljanje kakovostnih odnosov z drugimi ljudmi, poznavanje jezika, prejšnje izkušnje v tujini in podobno. Ugotovljeno je, da so zgoraj omenjene spremenljivke v pozitivni korelaciji s stopnjo uspešnosti prilagajanja na področju medsebojnega delovanja, zato je treba to dejstvo upoštevati tudi v postopku izbire kandidatov, pa tudi kasneje, v času bivanja v tujini, še posebej, ker so ti podatki pomembni, zlasti ko gre za splošno prilagoditev zaposlenih življenju v tujini.

Zadnja faza pri izvajanju mednarodnih nalog je faza, v kateri se zaposleni vračajo v matično podjetje. Ta faza je v literaturi znana kot repatriacija in zaposleni, ki se vračajo so repatriati. Dolgo smo mislili, da je ta faza za zaposlene zelo preprosta, ker se vračajo v znano in predvidljivo okolje. Vendar je praksa pogosto zanikala taka predvidevanja, ker so se delavci po vrnitvi soočali z nepredvidljivimi situacijami. Pogosto se je namreč dogajalo, da se njihova pričakovanja glede nadaljnjega razvoja kariere, statusa v organizaciji in podobno niso uresničila. Tudi mnogi zaposleni so bili po vrnitvi dodeljeni na delovna mesta, ki so imela nižji status v razmerju do položaja v tujini, njihova avtonomija je bila močno omejena, njihovo znanje in mednarodne izkušnje niso bili dovolj vrednoteni itd. Vse to so bili razlogi za nezadovoljstvo zaposlenih, zato so mnogi od njih zapustili podjetje.

Za podjetje ima zapuščanje repatriatov zelo negativne posledice. Ti učinki se lahko odražajo v izgubi finančnih sredstev, ki so jih vlagali v zaposlene, pa tudi v izgubi človeškega kapitala, saj so zaposleni v času bivanja v tujini dobili določene mednarodne izkušnje. Izguba je lahko še posebej velika, če se taki delavci, potem ko so zapustili podjetje, zaposlijo pri neposrednem konkurentu. Na ta način konkurenti dobijo zaposlene z mednarodnimi izkušnjami in znanjem, ne da bi kaj vlagali vanje. V zvezi s tem opozarjamo na pomembnost izvajanja formalnega programa vračanja. Ugotovljeno je namreč bilo, da imajo družbe, predvsem HRM v njih, obveznost in dolžnost, da glede na ustrezne izkušnje učinkovito izvajajo proces repatriacije, tako da dovolj zgodaj organizirajo priprave zaposlenih na vrnitev v matično družbo in nato z ustreznimi nasveti v zvezi z nadaljnjim razvojem njihove kariere poskušajo združiti interese zaposlenih in organizacij.

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