

Hilary Harris explains why organisations must do more to develop their international managers

In today's global economy, the strategic management of international workers has become a critical component of the effective leadership of organisations. It is an area where L&D professionals need to actively engage, rather than leave it to line managers or compensation and benefits specialists.

The methods used to develop global managers have changed radically from the days when organisations controlled expats from HQ, with complex, long-term succession-planning models and centrally dictated career and development plans. Development professionals must move away from outdated notions of international development. This implies a need for greater proactivity and a strategic and flexible approach to international management-development (IMD).

Those responsible for L&D need to be more aware of the implications of the range of forms of international working. Each has distinct development needs that should be addressed:

- expatriate assignments: the employee and family move to the host country for a specified period, usually more than one year;
- short-term assignments: a specified duration, usually less than a year, and family may accompany the employee;
- international commuters: managers 'commute' from their home country to a workplace in another country, usually on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, while the family remains at home; and
- frequent flyers: the individual undertakes frequent international business trips but does not relocate.

L&D professionals must work closely with the individuals and their HR and line managers to define what type of learning and development they are expecting from each of these working scenarios. This is likely to involve a higher level of activity in developing cross-cultural skills, using international business experience for development and expanding a well-designed international talent pool.

Preparing for international work must include a broad spectrum of development options: training and briefings, visits and shadowing, cross-cultural training and setting up home/host sponsor roles. Development professionals should do much more to work out measures to assess whether the assignment has been successful from an L&D perspective.

How can the L&D function deliver improvements to international development? In my view, what many organisations need is an explicit, international development strategy, which includes defining global leadership competencies, ensuring diversity in top management positions, career management, identifying high potentials, succession-planning, designing and evaluating development interventions and managing international mobility for IMD purposes.

The challenges in developing future leaders with international understanding include:

- continually searching for creative ways to integrate L&D into regular management processes;
- acknowledging in word and deed that leadership-development and diversity are inseparably entwined;
- adopting a dual-dialogue approach to international career- and development-planning;
- linking learning interventions closely to the strategic needs of the organisation; and
- managing international mobility for development purposes in more strategic and flexible ways.

For L&D professionals, getting involved in the total IMD process involves a partnership with management colleagues to ensure that organisational and individual needs are met. Tailoring development to both organisational and individual needs and capabilities, and managing them better, can significantly improve their impact.

Some issues illustrate how L&D specialists must contribute to greater effectiveness: for example, critical problems for short-term assignments are work-life balance issues such as long hours and separation from family. Another concern is the difficulty international commuters face in dealing with cultural differences.

Overall, the true impact of international development extends far beyond the individual and any particular assignment. Getting a better handle on IMD must move up the agenda: it has considerable implications, not just for L&D professionals, but for the whole organisation's future. ■

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