



Managing an International Workforce: Strategies that create loyalty and commitment

Expatease

Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal 332
1012 RW Amsterdam
Ph: 020 616 0094
www.expatease.nl

Managing an International Workforce: Strategies that create loyalty and commitment

By Anne Parker

It is easy to understand that adapting to life in the Netherlands is a challenging experience. But is it impacting your international workforce? Does it affect their productivity or loyalty and commitment to you their employer?

Research shows that world wide 25%¹ of expat employees (sent by their company overseas for a contracted time period) leave their company during the contract - in comparison with the attrition rate for local employees which is 13%. The number one reason for assignment failure is an inability to adapt to the new environment. And there is no reason to assume that internationals that move to the Netherlands of their own volition are experiencing fewer challenges than expats sent here and supported by their company.

Companies face the challenge of how to create loyalty and commitment in an international workforce which has no history or emotional connection with the company or with the Dutch culture.

Then there is the skills shortage and 'War for Talent' and the fact that in our modern global, connected world many of our promising and developed talent are Generation Xers. This group is distinguished from previous generations by its immersion in technology, better education, self reliance and passion for individual freedoms.

So how do you develop loyalty in your international workforce which has no history or emotional connection with either your company or the Dutch culture? How do you create commitment in a workforce which has the ability to find a new job in a new country at the touch of a key pad, which keeps their CV up to date and has an eye on the job market?

1 GMAC Global Relocation Services 2008 *Global Relocation Trends*. www.gmac.com.
154 international companies took part with an employee population of 4,3 million.

There is clearly a need to implement strategies which support your internationals whilst they are adapting to life in the Netherlands and which, in turn, create loyalty and commitment to you - their employer.

ExpatEase is in a unique position to access first hand records of the challenges internationals face when moving to the Netherlands

This white paper is a result of findings from our training programs in the last year, both the Expat Skills and Cultural Competence training programs. The Expat Skills Program is the only one of its kind in the Netherlands, developing leadership and change management skills to enable internationals to manage change, adapt to a new environment and take control of their transition to Dutch life. The training programs supply us with first hand accounts of the challenges, issues and concerns of internationals.

It puts us in a unique position to understand what you as employers can do to develop their loyalty and commitment. This white paper is written for you:

(Note: we use the term 'Expat' and 'International' interchangeably to describe someone who has come to the Netherlands to work and is a knowledge migrant, it does not reflect the type of employment contract they have, or how they arrived.)

The Challenges

What participants tell us.....

No-one is ever prepared for the impact that change has on so many different levels of their life, emotions, behaviour and identity.

Many expats assume that their own experience of culture shock is a sign of failure or weakness in themselves or that there is something wrong with their choice of the Netherlands

Most are surprised by the length of time it has taken for them to feel settled and confident living here. They expected 6 months and in reality it has taken years to 'feel at home'.

A lack of awareness of the adaptation process and impact of change has many internationals (and their managers) assuming they are operating at optimum level, when in fact some are experiencing very high levels of stress.²

Some internationals assume their own experience and struggle is a sign of failure or weakness in them. Others assume that there is something wrong with their choice of the Netherlands.

Internationals who came here on their own initiative do not see themselves as an 'expat'. The result is that they are unaware of expat networks or support services.

² Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale, T.H. Holmes, R.H. Rahe. *The Social Readjustment Rating Scale* (1967)

Many report finding it difficult to convey to non-internationals the difficulties they face or their feeling of isolation. This in turn stops them from requesting help and support from their company when they need it most.

We at ExpatEase believe that in a very real sense, internationals in their early years here are focusing their time and effort on meeting their basic human needs³:

Physiological - e.g. finding a home, job and school, organising utilities and food

Safety - e.g. developing routines, exploring the neighbourhood, becoming familiar with the transport system, organising insurance and healthcare, dealing with bureaucracy and administration

Belonging - e.g. meeting colleagues, creating a team, making friends, keeping in contact with family, developing a community and social life, feeling part of the neighbourhood

Abraham Maslow described these first three levels of human needs as “deficiency needs” meaning that the individual does not feel anything if they are met, however can become stressed if these needs are not being met.

A natural part of the adaptation process is to form expectations of the Netherlands and to experience disappointment when some of these expectations are not met.

Managing Expectations

How does one manage expectations of life in the Netherlands? When a newly arrived international is disappointed it can lead them to form negative opinions about Dutch life that may be inaccurate and limited. Negative opinions may prevent the international from identifying opportunities and developing long term goals.

It is important to acknowledge that forming expectations of the Netherlands and experiencing disappointment when an expectation is not met, is natural. All internationals, irrespective of the country to which they have moved, experience disappointments and must adjust their expectations in the face of reality.

The key is to enable your internationals to set realistic expectations of Dutch life. This is an area where an employer can make a difference.

3 Abraham Maslow. Hierarchy of Needs. *Motivation and Personality* (1970)

We will start by looking at the top 10 areas that internationals tell us the Netherlands did not meet their expectations (not in order of priority):

- The weather and the resulting indoor lifestyle
- Dutch communication style: direct, impersonal, insensitive
- The health care system: bureaucratic, slow, doctors act as gatekeepers to further treatment
- Food: lack of variety in cuisine
- Bureaucracy: slow and in Dutch
- Dutch language: hard to learn or practice, creates a feeling of inferiority and isolation
- Inflexibility: in attitudes and infrastructure
- Lack of tolerance for the international's experience
- Customer service: poor, customer does not have priority
- Cost of living: higher than expected

Participants in our training benefit from understanding the adaptation process as a whole. In this way they can see that any dissatisfactions regarding the Netherlands may be related to a phase of adaptation (feeling disappointed and powerless) rather than specific complaints or flaws in the country. As in fact all countries have positives and negatives.

Internationals have a wealth of experience of managing significant, massive change, that can be translated into skills and change management expertise.

Though the above list of disappointments is valid, it's vital that an expat can understand that adjusting their expectations is a process experienced by everyone moving to a new country, and that feeling disappointed does not symbolise that the Netherlands is a wrong choice.

Change Management Expertise

All international employees have a wealth of experience of managing significant, massive and ongoing change that far surpasses the effect of any role-play. Most internationals have an improved ability to manage change, BUT... they are unable to describe how this ability can be translated into their attitudes and behaviours in a professional setting.

In the Expat Skills Program participants assess their move to the Netherlands as if it was a project, requiring them to manage, motivate and plan themselves through change. This enables them to identify and develop change management expertise. Participants see the greatest opportunities to implement their change management expertise within the workplace.

What strategies can create loyalty and commitment?

First by working within a context that accepts your international employees experience an exciting, rewarding and challenging process as they adapt to life in the Netherlands.

This enables you as a company to quickly connect with your new arrivals and creates an environment of understanding. Acknowledging the experience of your international employees is a very quick way to demonstrate your credentials as an employer and acknowledges what is really going on in their personal life.

Create a welcome program.

Have your new arrivals feel part of a team. Ensure they meet a different team member for lunch every day for the first week, both Dutch and international. Enable them to create a network as soon as possible that will support them both professionally and personally.

Educate your managers on the challenges facing their international team members.

Enable your managers to spot the signs that a team member is finding it difficult to adapt e.g. frequent sick days, returning to their home country often, or volatile behaviour. Your managers can also ensure that new arrivals maintain a healthy balance between work and home life. Many internationals may work long hours as a way of avoiding dealing with the challenges of their personal life. This increases their stress levels and risk of illness.

Develop your internationals' knowledge of the adaptation process.

Understanding the impact of and reactions to change can help your employees enormously. Through the Expat Skills Program your international staff will understand that they are normal and not alone in their experience. The training itself gives a clear message of support from you the company BUT... puts the tools and responsibility for managing the process in your employee's hands.

Create a Recognition Scheme for long term internationals.

This goes back to context again; it acknowledges the expat's personal achievements within a positive framework and recognises loyalty and commitment. It is also an opportunity to provide detailed information on how your employee dealt with the challenges of adapting to Dutch life, the high and low points, what they love about it and any advice or tips they may have. This provides real and engaging success stories to inspire others.

Manage expectations

When recruiting, provide information, statistics, websites and expat community links. This enables the new arrival to set realistic expectations, connect with international communities and be prepared for their early experiences of Dutch life. Tap into the expertise of your long term internationals (see the above strategy) to find out what is useful for new arrivals to know and to inspire them.

Provide internationals with cultural training

Understanding the Dutch culture as well as their own culture will prepare your internationals for cultural differences and enable them to develop appropriate intercultural strategies.

Access the change management expertise in your workforce

Providing the Expat Skills Program for your long term internationals enables them to translate their experiences into change management expertise and skills to improve their performance at work.

Implement a mentor system, partnering new internationals with experienced ones

This creates an instant infrastructure which supports the mentee at an early and vulnerable stage of their employment and helps build their confidence. A mentor can be effective in helping adjust expectations as well as developing short and long term goals. The huge benefit of mentoring is that it enables the employer to offer support which is felt within your international's personal life. This is an area usually outside an employer's sphere of influence but which can have the biggest impact on your employee's commitment to life in the Netherlands.

Expatease: Training international capabilities

We provide effective, dynamic and practical skills-based training programs for the international workforce.

We believe that training should engage, translate theory into business practice, and be dynamic and interactive in order to produce a change in behaviour and thinking.

Expatease provides dynamic and engaging training programs that translate theory into business practice. Using practical and interactive methods we create a long term change in behaviour and thinking.

The Expatease Skills Program

This unique program uses leadership skills, tools and strategies to develop one's ability to manage personal change, adapt to a new environment and take control of the transition process.

Cultural Competency Training

Expatease takes a practical and dynamic approach to culture and how it applies within business. Our Cultural Framework™ provides participants with the ability to analyse, assess and respond to cross cultural situations. We focus on developing cultural competency and skills to deal with cultural challenges in all aspects of business life. Each training program is customised to the needs of the company.

About the author

Anne Parker is the founding director of Expatease. Anne was born in New Zealand, lived in Hong Kong, Bahrain, Jamaica, Nigeria, the UK and Australia.

Anne has twenty years experience working for international companies and in multicultural and diverse teams. Her background has made Anne passionate about developing cross cultural competence and change management skills.

For more information:

Expatease

PO Box 10093

1001 EB Amsterdam

Ph: 020 616 0094 |

info@expatease.nl

www.expatease.nl