



Supporting Global Workforce Well-being

Highlights from a
collaborative discussion






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How to build resilient, high-performing and thriving expatriates

Savvy business leaders understand that helping employees achieve optimal mental and physical wellness isn't just beneficial for their workforce but can improve business outcomes, too. Healthy, happy employees work more effectively, energetically and creatively. Multiple studies have connected high levels of well-being with improved employee engagement and retention, better stock market or valuation performance and increased profitability.

As the world fully embraced remote and hybrid work, we saw an increased focus on promoting healthy teams or microcultures. The idea here is that when all the individual members of a larger group are thriving, there's a greater sense of personal connection, purpose and belonging, contributing to many business benefits. But achieving that team-wide well-being in the current environment can prove tough for even the best people managers, especially those with employees on assignments all around the globe. Expatriates are arguably at even greater risk of suffering unhealthy symptoms like isolation, stress and burnout. That's why Sterling Lexicon facilitated a discussion to explore what drives expatriate well-being in today's landscape, why it's essential to cultivate it and how to cement a business case for securing ongoing support initiatives.



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Setting the Stage

In two sessions moderated by Sterling Lexicon’s Chief Commercial Officer, Daniel Halfpap, several industry professionals shared their unique perspectives and expertise: Dr. Judith Eidems, Founder of Positive Expatriation, author, university lecturer and expat; Dr. Sabine Wendenburg, a Stress and Burnout Coach and expat; and John Kerr, Head of Global Mobility for Pinsent Masons.

Each had personal definitions of what well-being means, but they all agreed that:

- **Well-being is a pre-condition for success.**
- **Well-being can be learned and practiced.**
- **Well-being goes beyond physical fitness to also include a positive mindset leading to feelings of purpose, meaning and joy in our personal and professional lives.**

Global assignments are often exciting adventures and career-enhancing opportunities for employees. But they also inevitably present some bumps in the road at various times throughout the entire journey, raising a variety of emotions for everyone involved. Recognizing that – and sufficiently educating employees and their family members about it before they accept an assignment – are key ingredients for success.

The Drivers of Expatriate Well-being

What does well-being truly look like for expatriates? A good way to answer that, shared Eidems, is to frame it within the context of **positive psychology**. Entire dissertations (and plenty of TED Talks) have focused on this concept, credited to psychologist, author and researcher Martin Seligman. We won't attempt a deep dive here, but at its core, it focuses on building on our strengths, cultivating meaningful, rewarding life experiences and fostering traits like gratitude, resilience and compassion for self and others.

More traditional psychology models have tended to center on identifying weaknesses or repairing things that are wrong. Positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes a life fulfilling by concentrating on and fostering what's right and good.



To keep it simple, the acronym PERMA is a quick way to absorb and remember the five most important elements of positive psychology in the context of expatriate experiences.

No one will experience all these things all the time. There will be plenty of ups and downs as employees and family members navigate building new friendships and adjusting to different cultures and roles. But the more you can help your assignees develop and focus on these core building blocks, the more likely they will be able to turn challenges into opportunities. That resilience translates directly into happier, more productive and innovative employees who can bring tremendous value to your business, both during and after an assignment.

P

Positive Emotions

The right, open mindset leads to better experiences for expatriates and their families

E

Engagement

A focus on strengths leads employees to feel more engaged in their assignments

R

Relationships

Trusted and supportive networks help combat loneliness and foster connection

M

Meaning

Expatriates and family members are re-inventing themselves in the new culture and need purpose

A

Accomplishments

Help expatriates and families appreciate important milestones and recognize progress

Practical Ways to Implement Well-being Programs

How do you put these theories into practice?

First, you can ask yourselves a few questions to see if your organization is engaging in efforts to truly help build positive and rewarding expatriate experiences:

- 1.** Are we ensuring a proper focus not just on the technical skills required for the job, but also on the emotional strengths and open mindsets needed for success? Wendenburg noted that one of the best things you can do is ensure you are sending the right people on assignments for all the right reasons.
- 2.** Are we giving both our introverted and extroverted personality types the same opportunities and levels of support, or are we assuming extroverts will be better equipped to adapt?
- 3.** Are we adequately preparing employees and families for some of the negative things they will experience and not “over-selling” just the good things about the assignment? Are we letting them know it’s perfectly normal and OK to experience a range of emotions and equipping them with resources to process them?
- 4.** Are we recognizing that movement between similar cultures still requires adjustment time and adequate support?
- 5.** Are we setting realistic expectations around timelines, milestones and outcomes and building in sufficient time to adjust?
- 6.** Are we looking at what employees need holistically or only offering very specific types of support, such as with the physical move itself, or only offering language or cultural training alone?



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POSITIVE
EXPATRIATION

On the last point, all the panelists emphasized that providing moving, language and cultural preparation and support is naturally important. But they also wanted to highlight the fact that helping employees and their family members build on each of the five elements in the PERMA example is equally vital to setting them up for success. Once you have determined whether your organization is engaging in all the right behaviors associated with positive experiences – and resolved any that might be detracting from them – you can begin implementing strategies that foster greater levels of expatriate well-being.



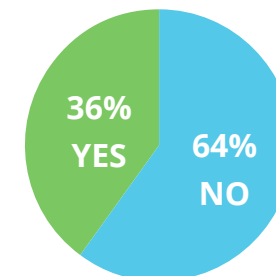
Easy, Quick Wins

We asked audience members to share whether they have formal expatriate well-being initiatives in place today. The results were a little less balanced in the first session and evenly split in the second:

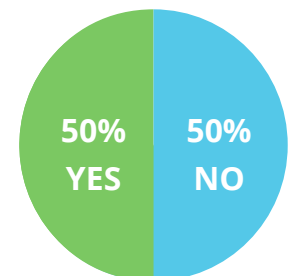
Audience Poll:

Is your organization currently running a global well-being program?

EMEA Region



AMERICAS Region



Clearly, there is interest in establishing well-being initiatives, but as Kerr pointed out, many HR or global mobility leaders may not have the luxury of dedicated resources to devote to it, and others may not know where to start. The good news is that no matter where you are on your own organizational journey, there are several easy, low- or no-cost wins you can begin to use today.

Some specific examples shared by panelists include:

- 1.** Personalize your initial “look/see” or orientation visits and location guides. Whether in-person or virtual, a customized experience that demonstrates you understand your employee’s and any accompanying family members’ unique needs goes a long way. If everyone truly understands the bigger picture around the “why” of the assignment from the beginning, they will have a much more successful and positive experience.
- 2.** Help the expatriate employee start building connections with and integration into the teams they will be working with before the assignment begins. Ensure they are on the right distribution lists to receive all communications from those teams before they go.
- 3.** Develop a mentor program. Whether it’s formal or informal, the ability to connect with someone already in the location with a similar demographic profile will be invaluable for new expatriates and families with questions about things like schools, doctors and hobbies.
- 4.** Look at what other resources you may already have available in the organization that could apply to your expatriate preparation. Are there management training courses, for example, or other learning and development tools that could help employees foster positive emotions and a more open, curious mindset?
- 5.** Establish a culture where employees – and by extension, their family members – feel comfortable asking for help. Expatriates are often highly driven, high performers by nature, so invest some effort in ensuring they understand it’s OK to revisit KPIs or timelines and seek additional grace. You may see greater success using an outside, neutral party, or establishing peer mentor groups where employees and partners or spouses feel more comfortable sharing struggles with each other.



6. Ensure the whole family is supported with resources to help them establish their new identities and social networks in the host country. This is especially important for accompanying spouses or partners and children of the expat employee.
7. Know what everyone's key strengths are and help them find new ways to build on and use them in their new role. When we're doing what we're naturally good at, we are much more engaged and motivated to continue. Remind all participants that assignments are great opportunities to find new strengths, too.
8. Conduct regular temperature checks. It sounds simple enough, but reaching out to ask how the employees and their families are doing on a regular basis throughout the assignment makes them feel supported. Keep the conversations less focused on work and more on the "small talk" that will help you pick up on how everybody is doing and feeling.
9. Encourage expatriates to share news and updates about their assignments with colleagues in the home country. Both the positive and more challenging elements are interesting and can help others learn, too.
10. Have a clear plan of how you will use the expatriate's new skills – whether they will return to the home country, move on to a different location or eventually make a permanent move. Many expatriates leave their employers within one year after an assignment if they do not have the opportunity to put their new skills and knowledge into practice.

Making the Business Case

The World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Companies should place a priority on holistic employee well-being not just because it's the right thing to do, but it's also been proven to be a profitable thing to do. Truly healthy employees are nearly two times as likely to work more effectively than those who are struggling with physical, mental or social health challenges.

To make a strong business case, it's critical to have data, because we can't manage what we can't measure. Fortunately, an initiative sponsored by global job platform Indeed and analyzed by researchers from Oxford University has given us the [largest data set on workforce well-being](#) to date, with results from over 20 million surveys. It also allowed them to develop a formula for calculating [work well-being scores](#) – an important part of the process for understanding where you are today, and how efforts are contributing to improvements. The results of their work have found that in categories spanning valuations, profits and stock performance, all key performance indicators were positively correlated with high levels of work well-being.

Expatriate assignments represent considerable investments in fostering or transferring new skills, building leadership pipelines or expanding market growth into new regions, to name just a few. With the right focus on supporting the overall health of the people you are sending on those assignments, you are creating a global workforce that is truly thriving. And thriving employees make for thriving businesses.



Your people. Our passion

Interested in learning more about books,
guides and other resources to help you foster
higher levels of expatriate well-being?

 **Let's schedule a chat**