



# Expats Display Greater Enthusiasm

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Previously published in *The South China Morning Post*, September 27, 2008

For companies that are new to the region as a result of mergers and acquisitions, partnerships or organic growth, exporting skilled employees to Asia-Pacific can be a good start. The road to success, however, is a two-way street as expatriates hold high expectations for their time in the region. Organizations must not only be concerned with meeting their own goals, but also in providing them with the opportunity to learn, grow and enjoy the experience. In this article, we look at expatriate employees in Asia-Pacific; who they are, what engages them, and how they view the workplace.

WorkTrends™, Kenexa's annual review of worker opinions across the globe, allows us to understand what engages these individuals, how they compare to the general population, and offers recommendations on how organizations can retain these key individuals. So who are the typical expatriate employees in Asia-Pacific? According to WorkTrends, they are:

- *High potentials:* A majority (77 percent) of the expatriates have been identified as "high potentials" through their performance management process
- *High performers:* Expatriates are either classified as being good (46 percent) or excellent (33 percent) performers.
- *New to the organization:* Forty percent have worked with their organization for less than two years; 37 percent for three to five years
- *Professional/technical employees and management:* Expatriates are mostly professional/technical employees (32 percent) or upper/middle management (27 percent)
- *Younger employees:* More than half (54 percent) are from 25 to 34 years old. In many cases, expats bring spouses and children—a factor that introduces additional challenges for the employee and their employer

Given this profile, it is understandable that parent organizations are willing to invest in these individuals by sending them abroad. It is also imperative that companies maximize their performance while on assignment and retain them.

One finding from WorkTrends is clear: expats are more positive than nonexpats. Of the 100 WorkTrends survey questions given to around 1,000 individuals, expatriates scored significantly more positive to all but three. The largest differences were in expats' perceptions of senior leadership. Expatriates responded notably more favorably regarding:

- Their belief that senior leadership has the ability to respond to challenges
- Their confidence in senior leaders
- Senior leadership's responsiveness to marketplace changes
- Clarity about the direction of the organization
- Senior leaders' concern for the morale and well-being of employees

Expatriates were also more positive than their nonexpatriate colleagues regarding:

- *Communication:* The extent to which the company has open and honest communication, and efforts to get the opinions of their employees
- *Training:* Satisfaction with on-the-job training and having the training to perform their job effectively

Previous research has shown that engaged employees are more productive and less likely to leave voluntarily, so it is important to understand the key drivers of expatriate engagement. WorkTrends reveals five drivers of engagement that are shared by expatriate and nonexpatriates, as shown in Table 1.

When employees feel the organization is going to be around for a long time, that they will be part of that future, and there are opportunities to grow while balancing work and family responsibilities, they report higher levels of engagement. However, while these particular drivers are universal among employees, expats and non-expats view them differently. On average, the scores on the common drivers differ by 15 percentage points; a disparity that could sow the seeds of conflict and feelings of unfairness among local employees working side-by-side with expatriate colleagues.

Table 1: Expat and Nonexpatriate Employee Engagement Drivers

Common Drivers	Expatriates	Nonexpatriates
I have confidence in the future of my company	64	47
Safety is a priority in my company	69	60
I feel there is a promising future for me at my company	59	41
My company supports employees' efforts to balance work and family/personal responsibilities	63	45
I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my company	62	49

Unique Drivers		
My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment	76	64
I am paid fairly for the work I do	59	40
Senior management demonstrates that employees are important to the success of the company	69	52
The workload is divided fairly among the people	59	36
I understand how my work fits into the goals of the organization	81	77

Note: values represent percent favorable

The table also reveals unique drivers of engagement for expatriates. These are issues that are primary drivers among expatriates, but only secondary (or not at all associated) with engagement for the non-expatriates. Organizations that wish to engage and retain expats should take note of these factors.

Interestingly, while several common drivers are future-oriented (confidence in the organization's future, promising personal future, opportunity to improve), the unique drivers tend to be more tactical in nature. That is, they have to do with factors that are more immediate and can facilitate or hinder getting the work done "today" (e.g., having the tools and training to get the job done, authority to make decisions, support from co-workers, and a fair distribution of labor). Intuitively, greater relevance of tactical factors seems reasonable for expatriates. After all, the expatriate assignment is, in most cases, a tremendous development opportunity and an implicit vote of confidence in the potential of that employee for the organization.

Thus, the future-oriented "typical" drivers of employee engagement (feelings that one can learn and grow, or that the organization cares about them as a person) have probably already been fulfilled by their international assignment. What remains are the more tactical concerns of getting the job done.

As part of a larger investigation of expat opinions, Kenexa has begun to collect qualitative data from expatriates in Asia-Pacific. Preliminary findings from expatriate interviews conducted in Hong Kong echo the quantitative findings.

When asked to report on the biggest challenges that they face, these Hong Kong-based expatriates talked about:

- *Communication with parent company:* Communicating with colleagues across time zones poses a significant challenge for expatriates. As a result, video conferences, teleconferences, email exchanges often occur well past the expatriate's "normal" working hours, often blending into weekends. BlackBerrys, while critical to today's executives, further complicate matters by keeping expatriates connected 24 hours a day
- *Communication with co-workers:* For Hong Kong-based expatriates, communicating complex ideas/processes can also be problematic when combining groups with different native languages
- *Getting the work done:* Expatriates note that simple tasks such as obtaining IT support, supplies and other day-to-day necessities can be a significant challenge when working in an unfamiliar situation

This preliminary qualitative data also highlights some common benefits, including:

- *Career development opportunity:* Expatriates were unanimous in viewing their time abroad as an opportunity to broaden their experience and contribute to their career potential. While they all note challenges, they generally feel that the challenges are outweighed by the benefits the opportunity can have in terms of skill development and career growth

- *Personal (including family) development:* Additionally, expatriates do not view their time abroad as simply furthering their careers. Many have families and realize that the benefits extend to their children and spouses who interact with individuals from different countries, travel and explore new foods and cultures
- *Excitement/anticipation Hong Kong:* expatriates are also excited to be living and working in Asia-Pacific. With the Beijing Olympics and the increasing role that China is playing in the world economy, there is a general sense of excitement and enthusiasm about living and working in this part of the world

This data offers us deep insight into expatriate engagement and retention. First, while they may have some challenges, expatriates are significantly more favorable about work than non-expatriate employees. Across nearly all of the WorkTrends survey items, expatriates responded more positively than nonexpatriates. Given the investment that host companies make in expatriates, this is good news.

In terms of what motivates or engages expats, the WorkTrends data suggests that expats and non-expats share several engagement drivers. However, distinct to the expatriate employees are a number of tactical, day-to-day factors. So while future-oriented drivers, such as having career development opportunities, are most likely already fulfilled by the expatriate assignment, organizations that wish to fully engage these high-potential individuals should pay closer attention to the day-to-day factors that facilitate (or hinder) getting the job done.

An early review of qualitative data from Hong Kong expatriates supports and extends the quantitative findings. In general, expatriates are excited and enthusiastic, and view their time abroad as a valuable opportunity, in spite of the day-to-day frustrations that they may experience in getting their work accomplished. Organizations should leverage this enthusiasm and do what can be done to minimize or reduce the day-to-day challenges that can plant the seeds for disengagement during and after completion of the assignment. ■

#### About Kenexa

Kenexa provides business solutions for human resources. We help global organizations multiply business success by identifying the best individuals for every job and fostering optimal work environments for every organization. For more than 20 years, Kenexa has studied human behavior and team dynamics in the workplace, and has developed the software solutions, business processes and expert consulting that help organizations impact positive business outcomes through HR. Kenexa is the only company that offers a comprehensive suite of unified products and services that support the entire employee lifecycle from pre-hire to exit.

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