

How to foster successful international deployments

Financial Advisory success stories



As Deloitte continues to solidify its global network, we have to be able to provide the same delivery and client service experience everywhere our clients do business. International deployments are an important tool that allow more mature practices to help emerging ones fill gaps and meet client expectations. However, these assignments come with plenty of challenges. The simple truth is that no matter how excellent an employee's work is in their home office, being an expatriate requires a unique set of skills — from mastering unfamiliar languages to adapting to different workplace cultures.

While the challenges can be daunting, international assignments have the potential to create winners all around. In this article, we profile two Deloitte professionals whose temporary international assignments turned into long-term partner track opportunities for them at their receiving member firms. We look at what factors made each of their assignments so successful, and how those achievements may be replicated in other markets.



Financial Advisory mobility success stories

In 2014, both Trevor Schumacher, Deloitte Brazil, and Oscar Arroyo, Deloitte Colombia, became partners while on mobility assignments. Schumacher, an American, became a partner of the Brazil member firm after two years in the country. During that time, he helped the fast-growing firm better address the needs of international clients — from hiring and training employees to developing new service lines — and he also became an expert on Brazil’s recently enacted/revised anticorruption law. Arroyo, originally from Spain, was accepted into the Deloitte Colombia partnership. During his assignment, Arroyo helped the nascent group more than quadruple its revenues and grow its team from 12 to 65 people. Schumacher and Arroyo’s success stories illuminate several best practices that help maximize the value of mobility assignments:

Best practices

1. Clarity of purpose

Both the receiving firm and the individual professional should know exactly why they are seeking the assignment, with real business and career needs driving the assignment.

For the host country:

Hosting an expatriate “can really jump start your practice” thanks to the unique cultural and technical perspectives they bring, said John Trinta, Managing Director, Americas Financial Advisory, Deloitte LLP in the U.S. However, given the additional expense and support required, potential hosts “must spend time thinking about what their needs are, and why it makes sense to bring someone in rather than going into the local market to hire someone.” If local leaders are unclear about the particular value that an expatriate can bring, the assignment is unlikely to be as fruitful as it could be. “The host country leadership, and how they reach out and welcome the person, is crucial to the success of an assignment,” Trinta said.

For the individual:

In most cases, it’s not enough to simply love travel, have a spirit of adventure, or be interested in experiencing a new culture. A critical question is how a secondment will further an employee’s career and what specific skills they can offer a given country. Successful expatriates “think long and hard about why they want to take an assignment, how it lines

up with their career goals, and also how their family feels about it,” said Trinta.

For Arroyo, the reason for seeking an overseas assignment was clear: he had a desire to help build a practice, but little opportunity in Spain where the economy was stagnating. Opportunity abounded in Colombia, where the market demand was growing but often going unmet due to gaps in the local knowledge base.

Similarly, Schumacher saw an assignment in Brazil as a chance to help a fast-growing practice build infrastructure and maturity; an experience he couldn’t have gained in a developed market like his home country, the United States. “I wanted to bring the U.S. perspective and knowledge to the local team,” he said.

2. Language skills

Starting with at least a base in the local language will inevitably make the transition easier for an expatriate. Language proficiency was an advantage that both Arroyo and Schumacher brought to their assignments. Arroyo is a native speaker of Spanish, Colombia’s primary language, and Schumacher intensively studied Portuguese, Brazil’s main language, before arriving in the country.

Even when an employee is proficient in a language, however, it’s important to recognize that it takes time to adjust to local nuances and different environments. Schumacher said that other people could generally understand him from the start of his assignment, but it took him about six months to fully understand conversations with others in Portuguese, and another six months to get comfortable making business presentations and writing emails to clients in the language.

Investing in language proficiency before and during the assignment is well worth it, though, for both business effectiveness and personal enrichment. Even when expatriates don’t need the local language for work, “if they can’t get around or communicate when they’re outside the office, they’ll get frustrated, and that frustration is likely to spill over into their work performance,” said Lupe Gonzalez, Deputy Forensic Leader, Americas Financial Advisory, Deloitte Financial Advisory Services LLP in the U.S.



3. Soft skills: ability to adapt to culture and form connections with local professionals

"Having the ability to integrate culturally in the market you're going to is crucial," said Hernan Marambio, M&A Transaction Services Leader, Americas Financial Advisory, Deloitte & Touche LLP in the U.S. While it's a difficult skill to assess, an employee who is open-minded about cultural differences and can make friends easily will be able to make a greater impact than an expatriate who ends up working alone and socializing exclusively with other expats.

Arroyo said he made a conscious effort to spend time with his Colombian co-workers, watching football (soccer) games with them and learning about their families. "Even when you speak the language, you have to make an effort to get involved in the culture, because at the end of the day, you need to be one of them," he said.

Successful expats also manage to master the delicate task of making a difference without making enemies. Too often, Gonzalez noted, "people make the mistake of going to a country with the idea they're going to fix things," an immediate turn-off.

Toward that end, Schumacher developed a humorous and sympathetic list of some common differences between Brazilian and U.S. expectations for work product quality to

use in his trainings. In helping local employees better communicate with colleagues and clients in the U.S., Schumacher has also injected some fun with emails that highlight current American sporting events or holidays. One offered an explanation of the U.S. baseball league system as playoff season dawned; another laid out a typical Thanksgiving celebration, with a full menu and timeline of events from his own family's experience. "It's important for your colleagues to understand your culture, even as you are striving to learn theirs," he said.

4. Close and ongoing communication among the sending firm, the employee, and the receiving firm

"The three legs of the stool are critical; they all need to be thoughtful and engaged throughout the entire assignment," said Trinta. Contacts on both sides – particularly at the sending firm – can be crucial during an assignment when an employee is confronting obstacles or general difficulties and is looking for help to resolve them. Trinta also aims to have expatriates stay in touch with someone from the sending firm to ease their transition back in the likely event they return home after a mobility assignment.

Conclusion

Done right, mobility assignments have the promise to change lives and member firms in a number of ways. Becoming a partner as part of a mobility assignment is "the ultimate dream," said Trinta, "but that doesn't mean it's the only way an assignment can be successful." In fact, many mobility assignments are valuable for the knowledge an employee brings back to their home country, and may pave the way for partnership opportunities there. Guillermo Olguin, for example, left his home practice in Deloitte Mexico for a mobility assignment in the U.S. where he met all of the expectations both firms had for him. When he returned to Mexico, the mobility experience helped him prepare for the partnership track in Deloitte Mexico. Today, he is the lead partner of the M&A Transaction Services practice of Deloitte Mexico.

"These mobility assignments can really work anywhere," said Trinta. If you have the right people involved, you'll have a successful assignment."

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