

# Company case study: Sasol

What are the particular challenges of sending assignees to the Middle East and supporting them there? We asked Yvonne Webb, Senior Human Resources Consultant with Sasol, a global energy company.

**How long has Sasol had business operations and international assignees in the Middle East?**

Sasol has been doing business in the Middle East for quite a number of years, but it has only been since July 1999 that we have had assignees in Dubai and since the beginning of this year that we have assignees in Iran and Qatar.

**In your experience, what are the particular challenges with respect to sending international assignees to the Middle East?**

One of the main challenges has been the selection of the assignees. Sasol believe that for an assignee to be successful (and this goes for an assignment to any country, not just for assignments to the Middle East) that the assignee should not only have the technical ability to do the job but that they should display certain personality characteristics or traits that will enable them to adjust to their new cultural environment more easily. Characteristics such as flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, open-mindedness, patience etc are important, and we evaluate employees not only on job-fit, but on expat-fit as well.

As our assignees to the Middle East have been selected either to fulfil a management role or to be part of a project execution team, the ability to establish a good working relationship as well as the ability to manage successfully in a multi-cultural environment is of critical importance.

The other challenges have been to ensure that the employees and their families have suitable medical cover and that the employees and their families have peace of mind in the knowledge that their safety is a high priority for the company.

Schooling is another particularly important consideration and this links in with family fit for an assignment. For example, in Iran (Tehran) there are no international secondary schools and this will certainly impact on the decision of the assignee as to whether they accept the assignment and leave their children in the home country or whether they turn down the assignment should they not wish to have their family unit separated. Although schooling in Dubai and Qatar is of exceptional standard, there are often waiting lists, entrance requirements are high, and the scope of the curricula is limited. This would also impact on the decision of the assignee accepting the assignment.

**Is it more challenging to get employees to go on assignment to the Middle East than elsewhere?**

In general, it has not necessarily been more difficult for Sasol to get employees to go on assignment to the Middle East. The challenge offered by the various positions has resulted in a positive response to our call for applications for these assignments. In addition, I think the fact that Sasol has ensured that important issues such as medical, safety, spouse assistance, hardship allowances, cultural sensitisation for themselves as well as their family etc, are in place, has also contributed to the positive response. As Sasol is fairly new to the global arena, our employees also view the opportunity of an overseas assignment as an important step in their career path.

**How did Sasol deal with the recent war in Iraq?**

We did not change our policy, but we did begin communicating regularly with our assignees, specifically with respect to the company's policy on travel and evacuation during this period. The evacuation plans were developed by a highly respected company specialising in this field, together with our own Head of Security. Senior management were kept abreast of daily developments and any call for a possible evacuation would only have been made at a corporate level and based purely on professional advice. We were also very cautious in our communication to the assignees to avoid situations of unnecessary emotion and panic.

**What are your future plans for business in the Middle East?**

With our recently developed operations in Qatar and Dubai, we anticipate that the business will expand significantly within the next few years. At present we have 12 assignees in the region and they are mainly South Africans, with one Italian and one UK citizen! In the next year, the number of assignees will grow by approximately 40 as the project in Qatar gains momentum.

These assignees will not only be seconded from South Africa, but will also be recruited from other areas of the world, and this fact alone will provide numerous challenges ahead for us.

If you would like to ask Yvonne any particular questions relating to this article, she can be reached by email at [yvonne.webb@sasol.com](mailto:yvonne.webb@sasol.com)