

## **Returning home to Sasol, South Africa**

Sasol, the global petrochemical company, have recently implemented a repatriation policy. Yvonne Webb, Principal HR Consultant, explains why the need was so great – particularly for expatriates from their South Africa operations.

Statistics from many surveys prove what we all expect to be true: that while we all spend much time preparing an employee for an assignment, we tend to neglect the repatriation process.

The large attrition rates most companies experience with returning expatriates and the accompanying but unquantifiable loss of experience and talent is an unhappy ending for everyone – and not least the company. South Africa, in particular, faces a “Brain Drain” of people who, having once gained international experience, are loathe to return.

At Sasol, we were having a great deal of success sending employees abroad from South Africa. Having been out of the global arena for so long, employees are keen to gain international exposure and experience life in another country. Our repatriation record however was not very good and we had neglected developing a policy in this regard. We were finding that assignees tended to leave the company just as they were due to return, or very shortly after they got back.

To redress the problem, we first had to analyse why this was the case. Firstly, we discovered that it wasn't a problem peculiar to Sasol – many multinationals face attrition rates upon repatriation. In our case, though, we were able to discover that the main problem was dissatisfaction with the position the employee was offered back in South Africa. It was not necessarily a question of seniority or status, but more that the position had to be sufficiently interesting and challenging. We discovered we had to match expectations with reality.

There were some additional factors that affected us at Sasol in particular though. Firstly, we had grown accustomed to a high level of employee loyalty and we bargained on the continuation of the “job-for-life” ethos that existed. In reality, this concept was changing rapidly. Furthermore, our employees were vulnerable to being poached by competitors, driven by the fact that their assignment salaries were on a South Africa base, with a soft currency.

Secondly, and more difficult for us to address, was the fact that, post-assignment, South Africa was being perceived as less appealing as somewhere to live. Issues of particular

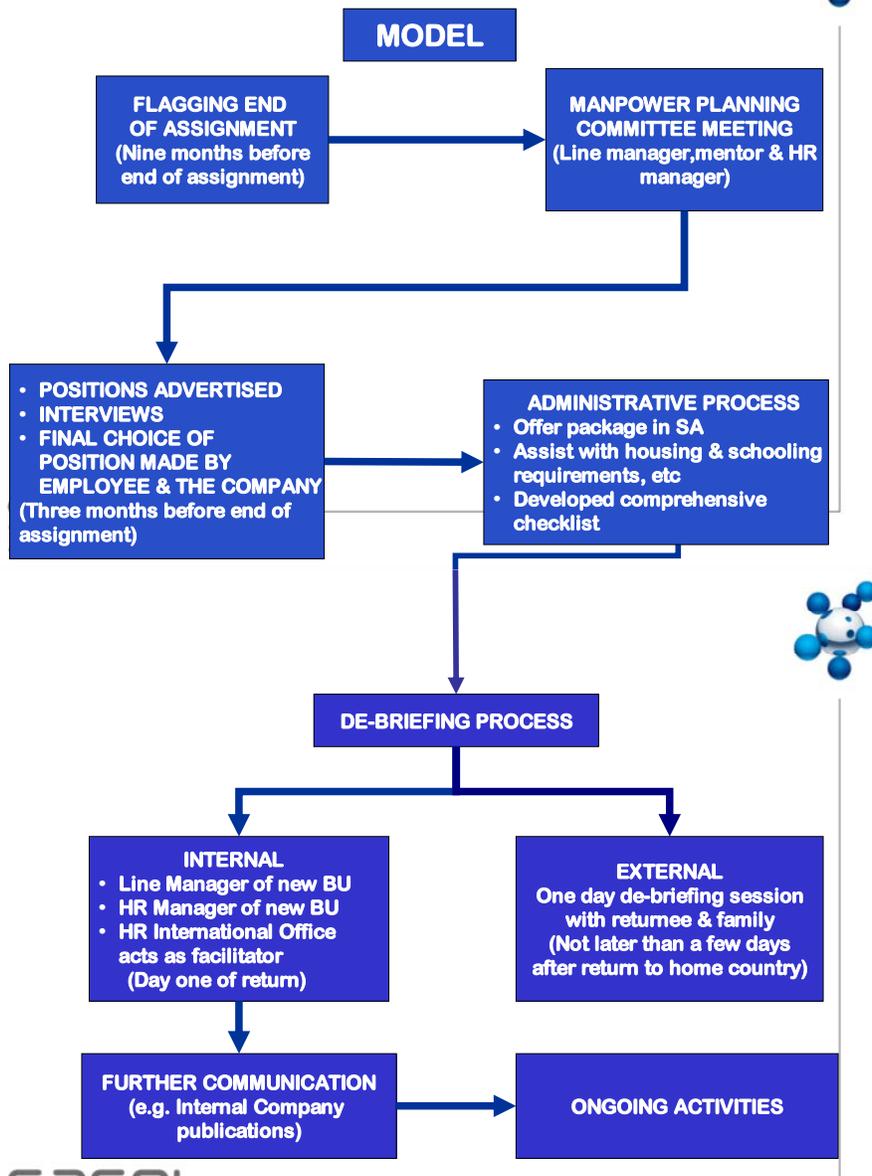
concern to our returning expatriates included the high crime levels, perceived lower standards in health and educational facilities, a deteriorating infrastructure and an uncertain economy.

**What we did**

We decided to develop a model for our repatriation process and all that it should involve, getting buy-in from senior management, line managers and the HR managers of the various business units.

We took the stance that not only would serious and applied treatment of the repatriation process send out a strong message to employees considering a new assignment, it would re-

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affirm the company's stance on the importance of globalisation. A successful repatriation is after all a powerful advertisement for future potential assignees.

We also realised it was important to take into account the fact that re-entry is a deeply personal experience, and will be different for everyone. For this reason, the debriefing programme should be as individualised as possible. In addition, re-entry is often more of a culture shock to the family than the culture shock that they face with expatriation, as they are expecting everything to be the same, as they are coming home, but it is not!

The day's de-briefing exercise with the returning employee and family includes a discussion about their assignment and their experiences and requests input for ways of improving the process for future expatriates. We consult with returning assignees on policy reviews and we use their experience wherever we can. Plus we encourage the assignee and family to discuss their re-adjustment and reverse culture shock to see if we can help. We do spend some time talking about the latest socio-political developments in South Africa and we talk about the spouse's and children's plans and schooling. The employee is informed of any changes within Sasol, the business unit, and plans for the future. We also have a discussion on critical HR factors (e.g. new legislation, policies and initiatives) and finally, we come up with an outline and plans for the role they would like to play in Sasol's future workforce.

On a more immediate level, and given that the de-brief is scheduled to take place within days of the expatriate's return, we provide an information pack with maps, local newspapers, information on local schools and medical facilities and corporate and HR literature for them to take away.

We are however continually looking towards our next steps in improving the process. We need to follow-up, show an interest, ask returnees to share their experiences with a wider audience and we need to make them (and their families) into mentors for the next generation of assignees. In addition, returning assignees are consulted widely in policy reviews and we use their experience wherever we can. We have by no means got it right yet, but we have come a long way in improving our repatriation process!