

At Home Abroad: A Study of Expatriate Housing and Its Ties to Assignment Success

The Interchange Institute

Executive Summary

Participants were 130 expatriates from 24 countries, living in one of 48 countries. 50% were US citizens. The most common current residence was US (12%). They had lived in their current country an average of 4.6 years and in their current home 2.5 years. The mean age was 41 (range 23 to 70). 81% were female. 79% were married. 32% had moved to the current country because of their own jobs or education; 56% were accompanying spouses; the rest had moved for personal reasons. 51% had children living with them. Participants completed an on-line survey about the role their homes played in their expatriate experience. This study:

- ♦ Clearly documents the importance of careful home selection and efficient settling-in for the overall well-being of expatriate assignments:
 - ♦ Efficient settling in and satisfaction with home were consistently related to participants' loyalty to their employer, their rating of the assignment and their mental health.
 - ♦ Those who said they would pick their same house again were also more loyal to their employer, happier with the assignment, felt more settled and had better mental health.
- ♦ Identifies an important dimension of how a home affects families – the difference in being “centrifugal” vs. “centripetal.” Centrifugal homes lead family members to be more separate from each other, and to spend time alone in separate spaces, often a feature of increased space that people think they like. Centripetal homes lead family members to spend more time in common space.
 - ♦ This dimension was largely invisible to participants yet was one of the most predictive aspects of their response to the assignment. Those in centripetal homes rated the assignment consistently more positively than those in centrifugal homes.
- ♦ Teases apart which aspects of an expatriate home are the most relevant for assignment outcome. “Décor” and “quality of neighborhood” were more important than “proximity to work.”
- ♦ Enumerates what is important to accompanying spouses in a home, and how that differs from what is important to employees themselves. Given the results, support services for spouses are clearly justified.
- ♦ Analyzes and pulls together some personal characteristics and beliefs that affect what a person thinks is important in a home. These findings lead to a few quick questions expatriates can be asked to target and direct relocation support.
- ♦ Articulates the way in which people have an internal “ideal” home that they use to compare their new homes against, and documents which aspects of these internal homes are most important to satisfaction.
- ♦ Clearly documents how people feel about their housing policy and relocation support services (if any) and the aspects of the policies that matter most to them. Generosity and choice in how much to spend and where to live permanently are critical.
- ♦ Spells out what people who are happy on their expatriate assignments actually do when they first move into their homes, and how this differs from those who are unhappy. Happy ones “nest” (hang photos and art work and organize their kitchens) and make connections with neighbors.
- ♦ Examines the cultural context of the new expatriate home. Those who lived in a home that was typical of local culture were more positive about their assignment. Demographic differences in who lived in culturally-typical homes vs. expatriate bubbles suggest a complex relationship between where people want to live and what their housing policy allows. Vivid quotations from open-ended responses illustrate how:
 - ♦ a home’s architecture offers access to a deeper cultural experience,
 - ♦ new climate conditions influence room layout and heating and ventilation and, through that, new family interaction patterns
 - ♦ changes in formality or size of a home affect how parents and couples interact with each other, not always in expected ways
 - ♦ expatriate families have to adjust to new neighborhood expectations, opportunities and limitations
 - ♦ having domestic help or not having domestic help live in the home for the first time challenges families
 - ♦ unfamiliar amenities (e.g. gas fire places, number of doors, new size of refrigerator) require subtle but profound family change
 - ♦ new room layouts affect who spends time with whom
- ♦ Gives voice to participants’ advice to other expatriates about how to select a home, and about what a “home” means in the context of living a globally mobile life.