

# REGIONAL TALENT MANAGEMENT – ASIAN EXPATRIATES IN ASIA

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“Asia Pacific is no longer a rounding error for Western multinational companies. For many the region represents at least a quarter of their global revenue – and growing. For others, Asia is already their largest region in the world. At the same time, the dearth of talent makes it a particularly difficult place to do business.”

– Spencer Stuart

Asia is one of the most diverse, stable, dynamic, and resilient regions in the world. With a total GDP exceeding \$3 trillion and 21 economies at very different stages of development, the region is gaining momentum as a major global hub of manufacturing, banking, and trade, with a rapidly growing consumer market. Comprising ten Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries (*Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam*) as well as *Japan, India, China, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Macau, South Korea, and Hong Kong*, Asia possesses a potentially untapped source of talent – Asian expatriates.

In Asia, the movement of staff intra-regionally<sup>1</sup> is a growing phenomenon, and along with it we now see the rise of the “Asian expatriate” – assignees born in Asia, with a keen sense of Asian culture, who relocate both intra-regionally within Asia and inter-regionally<sup>2</sup> to the rest of the world. The rise in Asian expatriates is undoubtedly the result of China and India’s significant transformation as drivers of the so-called ‘Asian Century’.<sup>3</sup> It is also due in part to the region’s urgent need to develop its human capital and workforce skills. McKinsey predicts, for example, that in Indonesia and Myanmar alone there will be an undersupply of 9 million skilled and 13 million semiskilled workers by 2030.<sup>4</sup>

Yet despite Asia’s unique ability to integrate a relatively diverse population, local preferences and cultural sensitivities across the region’s various markets cannot be underestimated. This is where Asian expatriates play a key role. In this white paper, we focus on Asian expatriates engaged in intra-regional mobility throughout Asia. Specifically, we examine: (1) why companies use Asian expatriates and the benefits of doing so; (2) how Asian expatriates can be deployed and leveraged for mutual advantage; and, (3) whether and how Asian expatriates tie into inter-regional mobility and global talent management.

1. Defined as country-to-country mobility within one region

2. Defined as mobility between regions

3. Lowther, A. (2013). *The Asia-Pacific century – Challenges and Opportunities*. Taylor & Francis.

4. McKinsey Global Institute (2012, September). *The archipelago economy - unleashing Indonesia’s potential*; McKinsey Global Institute (2013, June). *Myanmar’s moment - unique opportunities, major challenges*

## Why Asia

Asia recovered from the global financial crisis of 2008-09 more quickly than any other region, in large part because of strong economic growth in China, India, and Singapore. In the 2012-13 *Global Competitiveness Report* by the World Economic Forum, Singapore ranked second on the Global Competitiveness Index, with Hong Kong and Japan ranked in the top 10, and Taiwan and South Korea in the top 20. McKinsey predicts that by 2025 nearly 40% of the approximately 5,000 new large companies in the emerging world will be based in the China region.<sup>6</sup>



Three things are helping to forge Asia's growth and competitiveness: (1) regional integration in the form of economic partnerships, (2) intra-regional talent mobility, and, (3) investments in infrastructure and education. The flow of talent, in particular, is partly the result of Asian economies becoming more interdependent, with governments and private companies in the region taking steps to encourage this integration.<sup>7</sup> Changes in government policy across the region have helped, by easing of immigration barriers in order to support business growth and development. This has enabled an increase in mobility within the region. Indeed, had governmental policies not relaxed, the growth of these economies and resulting need for talent would likely not have come about.

Nations such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are leveraging human resource management in research, human capital and talent management on an unprecedented scale, while keeping pace with emerging labour legislation on collective bargaining and minimum wages. Also a priority is employee well-being and managing diversity, especially among women in the workplace.

There are a number of drivers for the global war for talent in Asia necessitating the need for Asian expatriates. It includes the regional competition for foreign direct investment (FDI), its rapid ascent in economic maturity coupled with a rise in knowledge-based industries, and an increasing degree of intra-regional trade (e.g., AEC 2015). But the relatively small pool of skilled labour intra-regionally and an under-developed skilled workforce that lacks economic maturity in many markets has led to increases in cross-border mobility to facilitate knowledge sharing and skill building.

A good example of this trend is Taiwan. As China opened its economy, Taiwanese companies and individuals began relocating there to establish businesses. The fact that the Taiwanese speak Mandarin and understand the culture of China helps to ensure the success of these types of assignments. Indeed, Santa Fe Relocation Services (SFRS) are now seeing Chinese relocate to Taiwan which was unthinkable 10 years ago.

But in spite of its strong economic presence, Asia faces considerable talent challenges. Among them is that many companies are struggling to fuel their talent growth, with 71 percent of respondents in a recent *Deloitte/Human Capital Research Institute Report* stating that they find it difficult to source appropriate talent with the critical skills that are needed, i.e., the right qualifications and the required global experience.

Additionally, widespread salary inflation in Asia presents a further challenge, with salaries increasing exponentially year-on-year at the rate of nearly 10 percent, resulting in high potential candidates frequently changing jobs in order to maximize their value. Retaining Asian top talent in Asia has become a formidable challenge.

5. Spencer Stuart (2011). Four practical talent management retention ideas for Asia Pacific. p1-4.

6. McKinsey Global Institute, (2013, October). Urban world - the shifting global business landscape.

7. Chang, R. (2014, 22 February). Laos PM grateful for S'pore help in building talent pool. The Straits Times. Singapore, SPH, p. B4.

### Why companies use Asian expatriates

Asia is the headquarters of more than 100 Forbes Global 2000 companies, including 74 headquartered companies in ASEAN alone. Singapore, in particular, is significant being ranked 5th in the world for the number of corporate-headquarters located there, and ranked first for foreign subsidiaries.<sup>8</sup> The hub of Asian market activity demands a high level of emotional and cultural intelligence among employees based in Asia to ensure the various markets within the region's reach are effectively managed. Emotional and cultural intelligence can be critical resources to help overcome in- versus out-group status, and to increase socialability, well-being, job involvement, and overall life and job satisfaction among those who live and work in the region.

One way to address top talent candidate shortages in Asia is to invest in, and develop, Asian expatriates. In a recent study by Ulrich and Allen in which they examined how talent delivers performance for Asian firms<sup>9</sup>, the authors found that investments in managing current talent had more impact on business performance than hiring new talent or retaining existing talent. Furthermore, the best performing Asian businesses from a sample of 570 separate businesses in Singapore, China and India showed that business performance (in relation to strategy and growth patterns of the firm) were higher for those firms that leveraged their company's most essential resource - talent.

Santa Fe's 2015 Global Mobility Survey shows that more than 80% of managers responsible for international assignee programs in Asia headquartered companies report that global mobility is 'very closely' or 'quite closely' aligned with company strategy. Additionally, 17% of mobility managers in Asia, compared to only 13% globally, say that they spend most of their time on strategic workforce planning. This suggests that sourcing and deploying Asian expatriates appears to be an important tool that companies in Asia use to address issues in the talent supply-and-demand equation.

Others argue, however, that a predominant reason for using Asian expatriates is that those with backgrounds or cultural origins in Asia are more likely to adapt quickly to a new Asian location noting, of course, that a lack of cultural readiness and adaptation particularly among Western expatriates are cited as some of the most common reasons for assignment failure. Consider, for example, that according to data from the Global Mobility Survey, Mainland China remains the most challenging relocation destination for international assignees, with 'cultural differences' ranking as a key reason as to why. Being of Asian origin while working in Asia gives expatriates an 'edge' and for some may mean that they are no longer in the minority as they likely would be in Western multinational). Some would argue that Asian expatriates relocating intra-regionally are better suited to the region precisely because of their deeply ingrained Asian cultural experiences ("fit") compared to Western expatriates<sup>10</sup>, especially in the areas of relationship building which can contribute to their cultural adjustment and 'authentic adaptation'.<sup>11</sup>

Japan and Korea are leading examples of the trend towards Asian expatriates. Both have a long history, especially Japan, of utilising international assignees that began in the 1960's and 1970's. As these countries expanded globally, many companies sent legions of Japanese and Korean nationals on international assignments. Korea, in particular, has an enormous number of Korean nationals living and working around Asia, and especially in China.

Consider also that many younger employees in Asia are willing to relocate. PricewaterhouseCoopers found that millennials in Malaysia (i.e., those born in or after 1980 and entering the workforce in 2000) want mobility throughout their career lifetime, preferably involving assignments abroad.<sup>12</sup> But these same employees favour loyalty to their employer, as long as they feel fulfilled in their role and receive on-the-job development, coaching, mentoring and sponsorship.



8. McKinsey Global Institute, (2013, October). Urban world - the shifting global business landscape.

9. Ulrich, D., and Allen, J. (2014). Talent accelerator: Understanding how talent delivers performance for Asian firms, South Asian Journal of Human Resources Management, Vol. 1, Iss. 1, 1-23.

10. Boon, R. (2014, 15 September). Embracing being Singaporean abroad - Senior bank exec relishes learning from challenges in overseas postings. The Straits Times. Singapore, SPH, p. B10.

11. Ramakrishnan, M., I. Nguyen and R. Siow (2012). Leading across borders: Playing global, staying Asian. HQ Asia. Singapore, HCLI: 48-53.

12. PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009). Malaysia's Gen Y Unplugged. New York.

“Working across cultures and borders is one of the most powerful experiences we can offer our people and we expect ever increasing numbers of our people to have multiple experiences of working with, and living in, different cultures. We need to develop a pipeline of future leaders with international experience and a global mindset; people who have the capabilities to drive the success of our business in years to come.”

#### – From EY’s Global Mobility Strategy

A key part of EY’s vision and strategy is to become the most globally integrated professional services organization in the world. By specifically targeting diversity and inclusive leadership as key drivers of the vision, EY is focusing heavily on the Asia-Pacific region to help deliver on its strategy.

Penny Angove, Asia-Pacific Mobility Leader at EY, has responsibility for EY’s internal mobility function. In FY15, EY moved over 1,000 people into and out of Asia-Pacific. A substantial part of her job involves facilitating, and then managing, mobility among Asia’s emerging markets. With a focus on four ‘sub-regions’ – Oceania, Korea, Greater China, and Asean – the main challenge Penny faces is to encourage mobility to some of the more challenging locations e.g., Mongolia, Malaysia and Indonesia.

“We move a large number of people in EY, including a large number of Asian expatriates,” she says, “because our overriding objective is knowledge transfer and skills development. We are very focused on helping our people, in particular, our Asian talent, to acquire the knowledge, skills and experiences that they can take back and implement in their home countries”. The success of the Asia-Pacific mobility program lies not in cost efficiencies but in resourcing, sponsorship, and relationships. “We provide coaching and support to our Asian employees to help them before, during and after their international assignment. We also provide language training whenever necessary to ensure they get the most out of their international experience. Sponsorship at this level is so important in Asia.”

Relationships with locals in the host-location are also key. “We tell our assignees to identify very early on in the assignment where they are likely to add value in the host-country location, and how that value will translate back into their home-country. It’s important that they educate their local colleagues about where they come from and cultural differences that exist, which we have found to be very well received by the host country businesses.”

Whilst EY’s mobility numbers are growing and ROI appears to be promising, Penny’s focus is now on linking talent management more deliberately with mobility experiences. “We need to get better at identifying our top talent, and finding them the ‘right’ mobility experience in order to further develop our people and enhance their careers.”

## Policies and Practices that Support Asian Expatriates

What are the policies and practices that support talent pipelines in Asia? To answer this question, we first need to understand that, for many companies, deploying Asian expatriates represents a cost effective approach to global staffing in Asia because local assignees can often be compensated differently to traditional Western expatriates.



### 1. Get the compensation policy right

Many companies in Asia address their talent attrition and talent development issues by deploying local staff throughout the region on alternative types of assignments that includes local-plus, permanent transfers, localization, and local-foreign hires. Deloitte's *Fuelling the Asian Growth Engine*<sup>13</sup> report found that permanent transfer and localization moves have become standard practice among many firms in Asia, with 49% and 53% respectively having formal policies in place. Permanent transfers, in particular, are not only on the rise but also the most common way for deploying talent within Asia as a way to manage assignment costs and because more Asian assignees are requesting intra-regional transfers as opposed to being tapped on the shoulder and asked to go. Indeed, ECA found that companies based in Asia are more likely to use a host-based approach to pay expatriates working in Asian countries in general than companies based elsewhere would.<sup>14</sup>

**Local-plus** - an approach in which expatriate employees are paid according to the salary levels, structure, and administration guidelines of the host location, as well as being provided, in recognition of the employee's foreign status, with special expatriate benefits such as transportation, housing, and the costs of dependents' education. It is worth noting that not all expatriates on local-plus receive the full range of additional benefits, these being at the discretion of the employing organization and largely determined by the location of the assignment (e.g. hardship versus non-hardship location), among other factors.

**Permanent transfers (local-to-local)** - an employee who resigns from his/her home country office and is hired by the host-country office of the same MNC at the time of relocation, but for which there is no return to the home-country and no promise or guarantee of repatriation or re-assignment elsewhere; employees are expected to operate as a 'local' in the host country. Also known as 'one-way moves'. Intra-regional moves are more likely (than inter-regional moves) to be arranged on a permanent transfer basis, which removes the requirement to link salary back to the home-country (balance sheet approach).

**Localization** - involves the removal or absence of an assignee's "expatriate" status from a policy standpoint, including benefits and allowances. In practical terms, it means that ties back to the home country from where an assignee has come from, or from where they may have originally been remunerated, are severed and the assignee becomes a "local" in the host-country. It almost always involves replacing a salary package (e.g. base salary, incentives, allowances, perquisites, social security, and retirement plans) with compensation comparable to that offered to locally hired employees.

**Local-foreign hires** - staff recruited directly from the large pool of foreigners already working in a host-country (e.g., Singapore, Hong Kong) rather than having them assigned from elsewhere. Compensation is locally administered.

13. Deloitte and HCL (2012, December). *Fuelling the Asian growth engine: Talent challenges, strategies and trends*. Singapore, Deloitte.

14. ECA International (2015). *Mobility in Asia*. London.

An important compensation challenge is whether assignee nationality (Asian national) and assignment origin (within Asia) have a greater impact on the likelihood of being deployed on a permanent transfer or localization policy as opposed to an alternative 'richer' full package. Deloitte, for example, found that 72 percent of respondents stated that assignments originating outside Asia, or where the assignee origin was non-Asian, would be unlikely to result in localization. This raises the notion of a hierarchy among traditional vs localised assignees, where a higher paid 'elite' class of international assignees may be perceived as being of higher strategic value, while permanent transferees and localized assignees might be stuck beneath a type of "expatriate glass ceiling" of restricted strategic and operational resources and opportunities. In a recent study of permanent transfers and localization in Singapore, for example, it was found that expatriates who are expected to work as locals in a host country not only receive less compensation, but also receive less preparation and support than traditional expatriates despite the fact that both groups of employees work under similar conditions and face similar challenges.<sup>15</sup>

It is worth noting that returnees are an important part of the global staffing mix of Asian expatriates. Chinese returnees, as well as ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia provide international experience and a deeper understanding of Chinese language and culture than Western expatriates. For many companies, and in China in particular, hiring Chinese expatriates with international experience and regional Chinese expatriates is a clear advantage. How to compensate returnees becomes critical, not just because of their 'unique' status in the expat hierarchy but because the value they can deliver on your company's strategy could be instrumental to, for example, a China market strategy.

The top three locations for deploying localized Asian expatriates are Singapore, Hong Kong, and China (although to first and second tier cities only). Numerous surveys report that these destinations combined account for nearly two-thirds of all cases of localization in Asia. Hot on their heels are five emerging economies in South-East Asia - Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos - described by some as the region's "emerging gems".<sup>16</sup>



## 2. Know your assignees

The disparate economic and cultural landscape of Asia, from highly developed Singapore to emerging Myanmar, and its range of myriad languages, religions and cultures, is a challenging global staffing issue. To address the vast differences in cost and quality of living this presents from an assignment management perspective, there are four key areas to consider:

- **Motivation** – ECA notes that many Asian cities have improved the quality of life for their residents through better infrastructure and upswings in salary trends resulting in notable decreases in hardship allowances. While FDI has undoubtedly played a role in developing better pay, healthcare, and housing, it also means that Asian expatriates may not require 'big packages' to persuade them to endure a hardship location. The motivation for an increasing number of regional expatriates is changing – from financial incentives to career and skill-based gains – thus facilitating less expensive mobility for employers and employees.
- **Policy** - provide sufficient flexibility to adapt compensation policies to the differential needs of both intra-Asian and inter-regional moves. The *Global Mobility Survey* shows that 54% of companies with international assignment programs in Asia headquartered companies have a different set of policies for different types of assignments but this trend does not compare favourably to the global average of 64%. Conversely, 34% of companies in Asia vary assignment packages according to intra- versus inter-regional assignments, slightly up on the global average of 31%.

15. Tait, E., H. De Cieri and Y. McNulty (2014). The opportunity cost of saving money: An exploratory study of permanent transfers and localization of expatriates in Singapore. *International Studies of Management and Organization*, 44(3): 80-95.

16. PricewaterhouseCoopers. (2009). *Asia's emerging gems*. UK.



“Often, Asian education systems, and to a lesser extent, Asian business cultures, emphasize technical excellence over skills in presentation or communication. While many Western professionals can make a great impression with a confident presentation style, the reverse is also true. Many Asian executives with extensive experience and deep knowledge may appear less competent if judged by how they speak in front of a large group. That impression is compounded when they are expected to deliver in a second or third language. There’s no question that English language and presentation skills are critical for global leaders. But if that is one of the first hurdles for screening and identifying potential future leaders, MNCs risk missing out on a wide pool of talent in Asia. Instead, if we consider these skills as something that could be built into the leadership development experience over time, MNCs will no longer be fighting the so-called “war for talent” in Asia with one hand tied behind their backs.”<sup>17</sup>

– Bin Wolfe, Managing Partner  
(Talent) Asia Pacific, EY

- **Resourcing and preparation** – ensure a thorough evaluation of not only candidate technical competencies but also their inter-cultural suitability for the host role. Cost is always a stated issue but providing host country support, in our view, is a hard (not soft) investment. What price can you put on a failed assignment?
- **ROI and talent retention** – as the ASEAN economy continues to surge forward, so will the demand and squeeze on retaining and sourcing local talent with international assignment experience. Recognizing the incremental value of an employee with such experience when they return to a local role is vital. Yet, the *2014 Global Mobility Survey* found that more than two-thirds of respondents (72%) had no procedures in place to retain assignees after they return, not just in Asia, but worldwide. Who wants to be training and recruiting talent for the competition? Furthermore, the *2015 Global Mobility Survey* shows that only 52% of managers in Asia headquartered companies perceive that global mobility delivers value for money to their companies, compared to 57% of managers globally. Clearly, ROI and talent management remain key priorities.

### 3. Understand Asian expatriate’s family situation and family support requirements

Contrary to recent reports showing that family concerns is a major reason for assignment refusal, in Asia there is strong evidence suggesting that family situation may, in fact, be a mobility enabler. Because many countries in Asia have a high number of females in employment, it is not uncommon for split family arrangements where one spouse undertakes a relocation while the other remains ‘at home’.

Culturally, this is a commonly accepted family situation in Asia even among non-assignee families where spouses live and work in different cities within the same country. This trend is reflected to some degree in the mobility policies of Asian companies that provide ‘unaccompanied status’ opportunities to potential assignees, and even encourage it. Competition for good school places in Asia is also high, which may further increase the expected usage of split family assignments.

### 4. On-assignment management and sponsorship

The struggle to build a talent pipeline in Asia has resulted in an emphasis on compliance and risk management for global mobility departments when relocating assignees intra-regionally. Given that many Asian countries are still emerging economies, the challenges faced by Asian expatriates can be immense and include:

- Security, terrorism, and civil unrest (which, not surprisingly, has led to an increased usage of firms such as Kroll, Globalsecur, and International SOS)
- Personal safety in terms of crime, natural disasters, kidnap and ransom, and in some countries gender discrimination for women
- Tax non-compliance due to tax filing obligations not being clear in some countries
- Immigration ambiguity where work permit requirements are ‘loose’ and open to interpretation or corruption
- A heavy emphasis on employee duty of care relating to security, and health & medical necessitating an increase in resources offered by Traveldoo, RUOK, and u-track

The *2015 Global Mobility Survey* shows that Asia headquartered companies face specific duty of care threats in relation to the working environment, accommodation, traveling to/from work, and the safety of the assignee’s dependents. Importantly, more companies in Asia have policies in place to implement duty of care for the above reasons, should it be required, than the global average, with more companies in Asia stating that their duty of care policy is ‘extremely effective’ (35%) compared to the global average of only 31%.

17. Wolfe, B. (2015, March). Diversity in Leadership. AsiaSociety.org. Downloaded from <http://asiasociety.org/global-talent-initiatives/diversity-leadership-bin-wolfe-managing-partner-talent-asia-pacific-ey> on 15 April 2015.

## Final Thoughts

Undoubtedly, Asian expatriates are growing in number with substantially different motives, needs, and attitudes towards global mobility compared to Western assignees engaging in inter-regional mobility. Additionally, the role of Asian expatriates in multinationals based in Asia may be different from those of Western expatriates. This means that the way these assignees are treated and managed requires special attention in many aspects: compensation, family support, and employment legislation, among others.

Similarly, many Asian expatriates are individuals relocating from developing nations (e.g., Philippines) who go abroad to developed countries in the region (e.g., Singapore), bringing with them local knowledge and global aspirations to countries that represent attractive work destinations. Even more challenging are Asian expatriates moving from strong to weaker economies, i.e., from developed nations (e.g., Hong Kong) to countries that are less developed and where human resource support systems and structures may not yet be fully developed (e.g., Myanmar). Being more accustomed to 'Westernized' and mature human resource and other support structures, including aspects of everyday life, likely creates a gap in expectations for these assignees. Thus, while Asia is a dynamic region with tremendous opportunities due to a variety of talents and aspirations, challenges exist.

The reality of doing business in Asia is that many of the exciting regional opportunities it presents also come with many challenges – not just in areas such as infrastructure, compliance, and language as one would expect in many of its emerging economies, but also in cultural issues that often arise between the 'east versus west' approach to management and business. Savvy companies are now realizing that the challenges of limited productivity, lack of transparency, and bureaucratic inefficiencies that often comes with doing business in Asia can be overcome by using Asian expatriates who understand local customs and the way things are done across many diverse, but inter-linked, cultures. Asian expatriates represent an opportunity for Asian head-quartered companies and those with large subsidiaries based in Asia to become 'future ready' to capitalize on the opportunities the region presents.

## Further Reading:

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## About Santa Fe Relocation Services

Santa Fe Relocation Services is a worldwide provider of Global Mobility solutions that support multinational businesses and their international growth. Our network of own offices enables us to provide services that match your own company's network at a local, regional or global level. In a world where the search for talent is not confined by geography, and where the transfer of these skills is key to achieving competitive advantage, Santa Fe provides mobility services that enable organizations to transfer their employees between their multinational business units efficiently and cost effectively.

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