



Building a support network while abroad

For managers in every industry, having access to a diverse network of business leaders, peers and friends who can provide advice, information, resources and perhaps most importantly, support, has become an essential business and career development tool. For expat managers in particular, both a professional and social network are crucial. Having people who can assist with the nuances of different cultural expectations, social roles, business etiquette and government bureaucracies is invaluable, and a circle of friends helps combat culture shock and feelings of isolation. However, building such networks in a new location can be challenging.

Separated by distance and culture

While technology has revolutionized the way we communicate, Skype, emails, instant messages, social media, texts and occasional phone calls can't replace spending time with family, having fun with old friends or getting together with work colleagues. Making things harder for expat managers is that in many cultures, organizational hierarchies are important and over-familiarity with those higher in the corporate structure is considered inappropriate and even disrespectful. Add different gender and social roles, language and cultural idiosyncrasies and it's easy to see why many expat managers find it hard to forge social and professional bonds in their new location.

Building a network

Despite the challenges, there are ways to make the process of building a supportive network abroad less daunting. For example:

- Get involved in the expat community. Expat clubs are a great way to meet new people not only from your home country, but also from around the world. Other expats can also provide information about networking opportunities and how to get involved in the local community.
- Contact your university or college alumni association. Most have branches around the world that hold events and get-togethers.

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- Join professional associations in your new location and at home. This is a great way to expand your international networks.
- Ask friends, acquaintances, or family members back home if they have business or personal connections in your new location.
- Visit the local Chamber of Commerce (or equivalent) to find information about connecting with local business professionals. Many Chambers of Commerce also hold networking events.
- Volunteer. Offer your business experience and skills to local charitable organizations. Serving on boards or helping organize events are good ways to meet local and expat business leaders as well as people with similar interests.
- Expand your professional skills. Take advantage of professional development opportunities offered by your company or local educational institutions. Attend conferences and seminars to connect with peers from your new country and even internationally.
- Join a local team and play your favourite sport or learn a sport popular in your new location. If you're musical, join a band or choir. You'll not only meet like-minded people, but also have fun and reduce your stress.
- Use technology. Social media not only allow you to stay in touch with family, friends and colleagues but network in your new location. Sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn have dozens of professional and social groups focused on expats in many countries. Also explore local Meetups – groups of individuals with shared personal and professional interests who plan events.
- Improve your language skills. Increasing your fluency in the local language is not only a tremendous professional asset but a social one as well. Locals will appreciate your efforts and will be more likely to help you integrate into their business community.
- Be flexible. In some cultures it's easy to approach people directly while in others you may need an intermediary. Stay open to how networking is conducted locally. For example, in some parts of Asia you're more likely to make important professional contacts through karaoke clubs rather than the country club.

Finally, be patient. It takes time to build professional and personal relationships whether you're at home or abroad. Both are essential to enhancing your future and enriching your life. If you would like more information about living and working abroad, contact your Employee Assistance Program.

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