

# Internationally Speaking

by  
Bruce Alan Johnson

Few senior executives would knowingly do something in their companies to lose \$3.5 million for every \$5 million they invested in a project. Yet this is the exact loss experienced by most American companies today for each employee they send overseas. In the book co-authored with my colleague Bill Ayres—*Carry a Chicken in Your Lap—Or Whatever It Takes to Globalize Your Business*—we explain all the errors made by large and small companies alike, and the huge costs paid when these errors are denied or ignored.

Our research revealed that the failure rate of overseas postings is roughly 75%. But the retired head of HR for one Fortune 100 company told us a few months ago that his company routinely accepted a 90% failure rate! Fortunately, this is wholly avoidable, if you adopt new approaches. This failure rate, by the way, becomes especially upsetting when one pauses to remember that this means failed careers, too. Every company bears the responsibility of seeing that the careers of its employees are enhanced, not ruined.

We all remember our mothers telling us, “You can be anything you want to be, do anything you want to do!” Now this is part of the American belief system that is intricately woven into our culture. And as wonderful as those words are, most of us have matured to understand that they’re simply not universally true. (Example: until robotic science advances considerably, a sight-impaired person is not going to be able to be a neurosurgeon.) This is profoundly true in international business, too: it’s not for everyone! It’s high time for American organizations to start viewing international staffing more like neurosurgery and a lot less like letter-writing (which almost anyone can do).



In choosing the right people to send overseas, getting it right can result in huge profit increases to your organization, and a gigantic improvement in effectiveness and market share. But there’s even more good news. Although the mainstream press is bemoaning the steady decline of the US dollar, the flip side of this is hugely advantageous to American companies. For the lower the dollar falls, the more affordable and appealing become our products and services to all other countries! In short, there has never been a better time for American companies to venture or expand into the international arena.

Obviously one article cannot explain every step and nuance that must be mastered to be successful overseas. But some of the general guidelines can be discussed. The most common and expensive mistake made today is the assumption that because Felix was a fabulous performer in Fargo, he's going to be a stellar success in Frankfurt. Nothing could be further from the truth. A good maxim to remember is that there is no country like America outside of America. Which means that in evaluating whom to send overseas, we must pay special heed to how the candidates will handle differences: in culture, religion, gender roles, race, and language.

The next is how well they handle sensitivity to meaning. Different cultures communicate quite differently than we do as Americans, and my long international career has shown me that it is the failure to understand this truth that has led to more international disasters than almost anything else. If the candidate can't think in terms of hidden, symbolic, or cultural meanings, failure is assured from the first week.

A longstanding cry in all of Africa and a great deal of the developing world is, "No more missionaries!" They don't mean that in terms just of religion. They mean it in terms of zealots who believe that America's way is the only way, and that there exists some amorphous right to interfere in the ways and beliefs of other cultures. This is positively deadly for any company, but I have been called late at night to help companies rescue overseas-assigned staff who have not grasped this all-important point. The watchwords are sovereignty and respect for others, coupled with the wisdom of the Golden Rule.

Then there's the clock. People who can't adapt to thinking in multiple time zones (and handling jet lag) have no right being sent overseas. We face biological absolutes when dealing across time zones (and the International Date Line, which makes it one day later on the other side of the line running through the Pacific Ocean.) Too, each culture views time differently from others. If the candidate is agitated by a government minister showing up two hours late for a meeting, she shouldn't be in that country.

Another dangerous premise of American corporate thinking is the false belief that an overseas posting should be a critical-path component of an executive's career path. If the wrong person is being sent overseas in the first place, his career can be utterly ruined by believing and practicing this myth! The wrong candidates, posted overseas, will never bring anything of value back to their companies or to their careers. Many Fortune 1000 companies have learned this lesson at bitter cost.

Another crucial consideration is flexibility: how flexible to different ways of living and thinking is your candidate? If the candidate finds himself uncomfortable around people who think and act differently than he, then there is trouble ahead in a foreign setting. With profound differences in how people of different cultures view sex, gender, race, and time, the candidate who cannot embrace those differences flexibly (and with a smile) is simply not the right person to send overseas.

Finally, overarching all of the list of factors to be considered when selecting a staffer for an overseas posting: are they eager to learn the language of the country that will be hosting them? A diverse range of communication skills and abilities are needed for international success. The ability to learn a foreign language—even if not fluently—stands high over all of them. English may be the most-studied language worldwide, but it is also one of the most dangerously complex. I have spent a career sorting out critical misunderstandings spawned by well-meaning and highly intelligent people for whom English is a second language. Those who believe that “everyone speaks English” overseas will pay a dear price for that ignorant belief.

It’s a wonderful truism that in any culture on this planet, just learning ten or twelve phrases in the host country’s language breaks down barriers and builds bridges to the heart—always. Fluency is not essential, though it often comes when one is immersed in a foreign language every single day. If the candidate you’re considering posting overseas has no linguistic aptitude—or desire to learn—you’re likely to experience dimly poor results from that person’s work overseas. Federico Fellini wrote, “A different language is a different vision of life.” The overseas employees who understand this will perform much better than those who do not.

Living and working overseas is not for everyone. But if a company pays close attention to the factors we’ve discussed here, the company will be sending the right people, and a strong alignment for success will be the result. Stand by for profits!

### About the Author

Bruce Alan Johnson has worked in the international arena for the past 40 years, helping solve communication problems between private worldwide corporate clients and sovereign governments and universities, and guiding companies in how best to tap international markets.

He is the co-author of the book *Carry A Chicken in Your Lap—Or Whatever it Takes to Globalize Your Business*.

Mr. Johnson has travelled in 76 countries over his career, living in Europe, Turkey, and Africa. He also speaks the languages of many of those countries. He has taught in several countries as an adjunct professor, served the White House in the 1980s, has been a Senior Fellow of the Hudson Institute, and has held numerous senior executive positions at leading American and international companies. Some 25 years ago he formed his own advisory companies here in the States and in South Africa. A frequent guest on radio and TV shows in a number of countries, Mr. Johnson travels widely from his home in rural Vermont.

With between 75-90 percent of expatriate assignments ending up in failure at a cost of \$3 billion annually -- not counting the damage to corporate reputation and ruined careers -- Mr. Johnson believes we can do much better by learning how to choose and prepare the right people to send overseas.

