

Supporting Employees Through International Relocation

How to keep support useful once the logistics are finished, notice difficulty without diagnosing it, and run a check-in that does not feel like an investigation.

The shipment has a tracking number. The employee, inconveniently, does not.

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MOVING THE PERSON AS WELL AS THE POSITION

Moving the person as well as the position

Organisations arrange visas, housing, payroll and a shipping container with real precision. A person can still end up in the correct apartment, with a working bank account, feeling entirely out of place.

The relocation is complete administratively. The employee is building a life. Relationships, a partner's or household member's work, language, income, independence and professional confidence may all have changed at once.

Someone can be doing the job well while the rest of life becomes steadily harder. Support that stops when the furniture arrives misses that. So does support that files every subsequent problem under 'culture shock' when the actual cause is an unreasonable workload, an illness, discrimination or a bad manager.

You do not need a psychological explanation before fixing a broken access route or an impossible deadline.

This guide helps you notice changes, open a respectful conversation, and act on the parts within your role. It does not train you to diagnose, provide therapy or perform clinical risk assessment.

Adjustment does not follow your project schedule

An employee may struggle before departure, on arrival, much later, or only when something else changes. Some settle easily. Others have recurring difficulty. There is no month at which you can safely declare the human part finished.

Early activity can conceal effort. Someone unusually organised in month two may be organised because everything requires organising. Later, when urgent tasks settle, fatigue or loss can become more visible. That is one common pattern - not an explanation to impose on every employee whose performance shifts.

Plan continuing contact

Agree a schedule that fits the assignment: before departure, in the first few weeks, around three months, then six and twelve. For longer postings, eighteen months and beyond. These are service checkpoints, not predicted crisis windows. Offer earlier contact whenever circumstances change.

At each one, check access rather than information. An EAP leaflet in the induction folder does not demonstrate that the employee can reach a suitable provider, in a language they can use, from the country you sent them to.

ADJUSTMENT DOES NOT FOLLOW YOUR PROJECT SCHEDULE

An illustrative situation

AN ILLUSTRATIVE SITUATION

An employee is hitting deadlines but working late most nights. They mention daytime hours go on school arrangements and healthcare registration. The next step is to understand workload and practical support - not to conclude they have an adjustment disorder and book them resilience training.

What support stops after the first month?

Who owns the later check-ins?

Can the employee raise something with someone outside the reporting line?

Do not wait for a performance problem to make the conversation legitimate. It is legitimate because the organisation asked someone to move their life.

THE ACCOMPANYING HOUSEHOLD HAS ITS OWN MOVE

The accompanying household has its own move

If an employee relocates with a partner, children, other relatives or another household configuration, each person has a different transition. One gains a role; another may lose work, income, familiar support or the right to work at all.

Do not assume who wanted the move, who is coping best, or which relationship is central. Ask rather than infer.

A partner's or household member's independence matters in its own right. Supporting it may also keep the assignment viable, but the person is more than a retention mechanism.

Offer options without assuming

- Career and qualification information, including realistic limits of local work permissions.
- Language and practical orientation where available.
- Clear eligibility for confidential counselling, with direct access that does not require the employee to administer someone else's care.
- Policy language that covers different household structures, partners and caregiving arrangements.
- A genuine choice about joint briefings or discussing personal matters.

Do not collect another household member's clinical information through the employee. If someone contacts support directly, explain confidentiality to them directly.

Children's needs vary too. Early fluency or apparent enthusiasm does not establish that a child is fine. School and family support can matter without the employer becoming involved in clinical care.

People moving alone

An employee without an accompanying household carries the practical workload alone and may have nobody local to call when ill. Ask about support without implying that having a partner is the normal arrangement.

Does your policy reach people directly, or does it depend on the employee acting as administrator for everyone else?

WHAT TO NOTICE, AND WHAT NOT TO INFER

What to notice, and what not to infer

Look for changes from the person's own usual pattern and at the conditions around them. Observable changes are reasons to ask. They are not diagnoses.

Work

Missed details, more errors, reduced engagement, much longer hours. Check role clarity, tools, workload and whether help is actually reachable.

Contact

More withdrawn, repeatedly cancelling. But introversion, private friendships and skipping office drinks are not warning signs. You do not know their social life.

What they say

Listen when someone says they are exhausted, overwhelmed, lonely, unsafe or thinking of leaving. Do not read every joke about home as concealed distress.

Language and access

If tasks are being avoided, check whether instructions are understandable, interpretation is available, or the work can be done in a suitable language. Asking a colleague for help can be sensible adaptation, not dependency.

Conditions

Discrimination, bullying, financial pressure, illness, disability, caring responsibilities, security concerns - and whether arrangements promised by the organisation actually materialised.

'Adjustment' must not become the label that makes organisational problems disappear.

What have I actually observed?

What am I guessing?

What condition can I check or improve?

OPENING THE CONVERSATION WITHOUT CORNERING ANYONE

Opening the conversation without cornering anyone

Private setting, enough time, stated purpose. Ask permission to raise what you have noticed, and leave room for the employee not to disclose anything personal.

Start with an observation

'I've noticed you've been working later, and you mentioned the admin is taking a lot of time. Would it be useful to look at what's making the workload difficult?'

Ask about the move

'We arranged the logistics, but I want to check the support still fits. What's been harder than expected, and what would make a practical difference?'

'You don't need to share anything personal. Are there circumstances we should take into account when planning work or support?'

If they describe something difficult

'Thank you for telling me. That sounds hard to carry. What would be most useful from me - listening, looking at a work change, or helping you find the right support?'

Normalization can be useful when it reduces shame without flattening the person's experience. 'A lot of people find this part difficult' or 'that makes sense in the circumstances' can help when offered tentatively. 'Everyone goes through this, so don't worry' is different: it can close the conversation and imply there is nothing to address.

If they would rather not

'That's fine. You don't have to tell me more. I'll send the support options, and we can still look at the workload. Would you prefer a different contact for anything personal?'

A sentence I could use in my own style:

OPENING THE CONVERSATION WITHOUT CORNERING ANYONE

Keep the check-in useful

A useful check-in gives the employee more options. It should not create a new obligation to reassure you that the move was worth the investment.

Avoid inventing experience you do not have. 'This can be difficult' is honest. 'Everyone I've seen goes through it' is only useful if it is true and if it does not replace asking what this particular person needs.

What practical option could this conversation create?

TURNING THE CONVERSATION INTO ACTION

Turning the conversation into action

Listening matters. What happens next matters more.

If someone names excessive workload, unclear expectations or missing resources, address those. A counselling referral can sit alongside a work change. It cannot replace one.

Agree something specific

'For the next two weeks we'll move the non-urgent deadline, protect Tuesday afternoon for the appointment, and I'll ask HR about the registration problem. Let's review on the 18th.'

Agree who does what, by when. If you cannot provide something, say so and name who decides. Avoid promises that quietly become another task for the employee to chase.

Offer a referral with choice

'There's confidential support through _____. I can give you the details, or help with access if you want. You can also use someone else. You don't need to tell me what you discuss.'

Clarify eligibility, cost, language, geographical coverage and confidentiality limits using the provider's actual information.

Follow up without monitoring treatment

'Were the options actually accessible, or is there another barrier we can help with?'

You do not need to know whether they attended, what was discussed, or whether they followed any clinical recommendation. Where formal occupational health processes exist, use them and their privacy rules.

One concrete action, owner and review date:

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BOUNDARIES, PRIVACY AND POWER

Boundaries, privacy and power

A friendly question from a manager is still a question from someone who influences pay, work and future opportunity. Employees may be careful about what they disclose, and that caution is not evasiveness.

Explain the boundary before asking for detail

Say why you are checking in, what information is useful, who may need to receive it, and what cannot stay private in an immediate safety situation. Use your organisation's actual process.

Record what is necessary

Document observable work concerns, agreed changes, access barriers and follow-up dates. Avoid speculative diagnoses, personal interpretations or unnecessary household detail.

Reasonable adjustments and formal processes

If an employee discloses a health condition or disability, you may be entering territory governed by employment and equality law rather than goodwill. Requirements differ by country.

Involve HR or occupational health where appropriate, use the formal process, record what was agreed, and keep adjustments separate from performance management.

Keep support distinct from performance decisions

Be clear about the standards and processes that apply to the work. **Do not treat willingness to disclose personal information, accept counselling, or participate in a support conversation as evidence of loyalty, engagement or commitment to the role.** Commitment is demonstrated through the work expectations that actually belong to the role - not through personal disclosure.

If the manager is part of the problem

Offer a route outside the reporting line. If someone describes harassment, discrimination or unsafe practice, use the relevant reporting and protection process. Do not reinterpret a report of harm as difficulty adapting to local culture.

BOUNDARIES, PRIVACY AND POWER

A boundary worth stating plainly

Making room for difficult thoughts and feelings does not mean accepting an abusive workplace, withdrawing a complaint, or tolerating unlawful conduct. No resilience workshop repairs retaliation.

Choice is only credible when declining a personal conversation carries no penalty.

Does our process make it genuinely safe to decline?

WHEN PROFESSIONAL OR URGENT HELP IS NEEDED

When professional or urgent help is needed

These are action routes, not clinical categories. Managers should not diagnose or independently determine clinical risk.

Support and routine follow-up

For manageable difficulties where the employee wants practical help, agree useful changes and a follow-up date. Offer confidential care without making it compulsory.

Prompt professional support

Persistent or worsening distress, marked changes in sleep or functioning, or statements of hopelessness warrant prompt professional support. Use occupational health, EAP or another qualified service according to your organisation's process.

Possible immediate danger

If there appears to be immediate danger or acute medical need, activate the organisation's local emergency process rather than relying on an ordinary counselling appointment.

Violence or coercion at home

Check whether it is safe to talk or send information - a work phone or email may not be private. Offer confidential specialist support. Do not contact the partner or require a joint meeting.

A good process names who acts, which service responds, and how to reach it. 'Contact HR' is not a crisis plan.

MAKING THE SUPPORT SYSTEM USABLE

Making the support system usable

Before departure

- ☐ Realistic account of role, location, costs, language and work permissions - including what support is and is not funded.
- ☐ Household support offered with consent and access that does not require the employee to disclose someone else's information.
- ☐ EAP access tested from the destination: language, eligibility, out-of-hours.
- ☐ An independent contact and route for raising workplace concerns.
- ☐ Local healthcare and emergency information confirmed.
- ☐ Check-in dates agreed, with named owners.

Early months and continuing reviews

- ☐ Check whether practical essentials are working - not whether a welcome pack was sent.
- ☐ Review workload alongside relocation demands and caring responsibilities.
- ☐ Ask what support would help, allowing the employee to decline personal disclosure.
- ☐ Offer connections and community options without requiring participation.
- ☐ Revisit support after changes in role, health, household or local safety conditions.

Return or onward move

- ☐ Treat return as a transition in its own right.
- ☐ Discuss role, housing, household needs and support before the move where possible.
- ☐ Agree a later check-in; familiarity does not remove the need for support.

Named lead for relocation support:

Independent contact and confidential care route:

Destination emergency number and trained crisis contact:

Date access last tested, and next review:

A support policy becomes useful at the point where someone can use it without first becoming an expert in your internal structure.

THE QUESTION WORTH KEEPING

The question worth keeping

What would make this more workable?

Small question, and it leaves room for a genuinely useful answer. It might be a clearer role, fewer competing deadlines, help with administration, confidential care, or an honest conversation about whether the assignment still fits.

You will not control every part of someone's experience. You can control whether concerns get heard, whether support is reachable, and whether the organisation deals with the problems it actually has the power to change.

The aim is not an employee who never struggles. It is a person who can do meaningful work without having to conceal what it costs to build a life around it.

One thing our organisation could make more workable:

About the author. Myriam Chebat, MSW, RSW, is a clinical social worker registered in Israel and Quebec, Canada, with over 14 years of clinical and psychosocial experience. Her work has included mental health and psychosocial support for personnel and families posted across seventeen countries, as well as employee assistance, humanitarian and cross-cultural settings.

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