What is the overseas experience really like, and why is it so significant? Based on interviews with returned expatriates, Osland uses Joseph Campbell’s metaphor of the hero’s journey to analyze expatriate stories and answer these questions. The resulting framework outlines the predictable stages in the expatriate journey and articulates for the first time the complex, transformational nature of the expatriate experience and its inherent paradoxes. In addition to helping expatriates make sense of their experience, this framework furnishes prospective expatriates with more realistic expectations and provides practical lessons for companies and human resource professionals who want to handle expatriates more effectively. © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Introduction

As organizations become more international, the expatriate experience is shaping the lives and careers of an increasing number of people. Yet the sojourn literature seldom describes the subjective nature of the experience, the journey inward. Academic studies relevant to expatriate businesspeople are limited primarily to selection, training, adjustment, effectiveness, and repatriation. It is the less tangible and less readily researched aspect of the experience that quite naturally eludes those who have never lived abroad. By gathering and analyzing expatriate stories, I hoped to achieve the following goals:

- Provide a better understanding of the complex, transformational nature of the expatriate experience and help prospective expatriates obtain more realistic ideas of what to expect and how to benefit from the experience of those who have gone before them
- Furnish current and returned expatriates with a framework for making sense of their experience
- Prepare human resource professionals who have never lived abroad to work more effectively with expatriates
- Provide ideas for improving the way companies handle overseas assignments.

Expatriate stories provide evidence that the most appropriate metaphor to describe what living abroad is like for many expatriates is Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey myth (1968). This common mythical plot consists of three parts: separation from the world, initiation involving the penetration to some
source of power, and a life-enhancing return. For example,

Jason sailed through the Clashing Rocks into a sea of marvels, circumvented the dragon that guarded the Golden Fleece, and returned with the fleece and the power to wrest his rightful throne from a usurper (Campbell, 1968, p.30).

Mythical heroes either seek to find their destiny outside their known world or inadvertently stumble into another world. In either case, there is what mystics call an awakening of the self. Magical friends guide the heroes past the dangerous guardians of a different world. Next, the heroes undergo a series of trials that ends with a decisive victory and brings them to the realization of a higher consciousness or a hidden power within themselves. After this transformation, the heroes return home from their journey with the power to share the boons or prizes they acquired on this adventure, such as spiritual illumination or the gift of fire, with their compatriots. Campbell notes that their attempt to reintegrate themselves back into their original society is often the most difficult part of their journey. Like prophets, people are not always accepted as heroes in their own lands.

Although it may seem an unlikely comparison at first glance, expatriate businesspeople have much in common with mythical heroes and the stages of “the hero’s journey.” Expatriates consider and eventually accept the request to go abroad, leaving behind the domestic office of the organization and the social support of an established life. They embark on the fascinating, adventurous but initially lonely, overseas assignment. The location is shrouded in ambiguity, due to unknown languages and customs. Their tasks are challenging, often well beyond what they would have been asked to accomplish in their own country in terms of autonomy, and the degree and breadth of responsibility.

Unfamiliar obstacles of all stripes and colors appear. They force the adventuring heroes to question their own identity, their values, and their assumptions about numerous aspects of everyday life previously taken for granted. Some of these obstacles appear in the form of paradoxes the expatriates must learn to resolve, such as how much of their identity must they give up to be accepted by the other culture? When they perform their tasks successfully and learn to adapt to another culture, the expatriates experience a solid sense of satisfaction, mastery, and self-efficacy. Their return is often marked by a sense of loss at leaving behind the magical charm and fulfillment of the sojourn; but among other changes, they return with greater understanding of foreign lands, increased self-awareness, self-confidence, interpersonal skills, and tolerance for differences in people. Some companies treat them as heroes and make use of the skills they developed or honed abroad; others do not.

To determine whether the hero’s journey analogy is helpful, I interviewed 35 returned U.S. expatriates and content-analyzed their stories using the hero’s journey framework (Osland, 1990; 1995). Although they never referred to themselves as heroes, their stories contain numerous examples of “hero talk”, such as their pride in succeeding at difficult work assignments, making it “on their own”, feeling “special”, and taking pride in their ability to acculturate and adapt to change. The myth of the hero’s journey does not describe the experience of all expatriates—some go abroad for reasons that have nothing to do with the quest for adventure or personal growth. The metaphor does, however, provide a greater understanding of the experience of numerous expatriates who are enacting heroism—for those who perceive an overseas assignment as a call to adventure and an opportunity to experience something that is not available in their own culture. The pertinent stages of the myth, which appear in subsequent following paragraphs, yielded the following insights about expatriates.

The Call to Adventure

The majority (80 percent) of the expatriates interviewed reported that they were extremely excited when they first heard about the possibility of going abroad. They described it in terms of a rare opportunity and a flight into the romantic unknown. “Our first reason for actually accepting the assignment probably would have been just the adventure of going
of an overseas assignment differs from domestic assignments in four aspects. First, it entails a journey into the unknown in a more pronounced way than most domestic assignments. There is no way to know what life in another culture is like until it is actually experienced (Schutz, 1944), and in some companies expatriates have less certainty about their next career move after an international assignment. A second difference is the greater physical separation from one’s organization, extended family, and friends. This means that expatriates face the unknown without the benefit of their accustomed anchors. A third difference is greater uncertainty regarding the potential adjustment of the family. Some expatriates feel a sense of uneasy responsibility for uprooting their family with no guarantee that every member will adjust to the new culture or that an accompanying spouse will find employment, gainful or otherwise. Finally, the fourth difference between the domestic and international assignment concerns the nature of a cross-cultural experience. Usually, one’s normal defense mechanisms and mental maps must be reorganized to cope with a different culture. Before that process is complete, the expatriate, like the mythical hero, will endure a high degree of uncertainty, anxiety, and unavoidable adventure. Not everyone is willing to withstand the discomfort. Many expatriates are like the heroes who accept the call to adventure, however, because they feel there is something lacking in their lives. Those who are ready for an adventure and willing to make the necessary sacrifices are likely to have a visceral, emotional reaction to the call. Thus, it is more important for potential expatriates to pay attention to their “gut-level” response (an excited “Sure, I’ll go”) to the call of an international assignment than with domestic assignments.

There are different types of mythical heroes—those who choose to undertake the journey and those who blunder into it; the same is true of expatriates. Initially ambivalent expatriates who do not perceive an overseas assignment as a call to adventure may develop that perception abroad, because the challenges inherent in an overseas assignment elicit heroism in many people; however, expatriates who have absolutely no desire to go—those who refuse the call but are forced by their company to accept the job—are least likely to adjust overseas. They survive, but their stories about their experience are much less positive. In this study, those expatriates who were ambivalent or unhappy about going abroad rated their overseas adjustment lower than those who wanted to go.

Just like mythical heroes, expatriates should be ready for the adventure. Having a
strong desire to go is an important selection criteria, not only for the expatriate but for the entire family.

Crossing the First Threshold

In the hero’s adventure myths, Crossing the First Threshold occurs when heroes step outside their normal world to enter the realm of the unknown. For expatriates, this phase refers to leaving home and crossing the physical and cultural threshold of a foreign land. In general, expatriates say that this stage lasts about six months and is characterized by uncertainty, difficulty, strangeness, exhilaration, ups and downs, and intense, accelerated learning. Listen to this auditor’s response to the question, “What were the first few days like?”

Sheer panic. Other than that, “Hey, no problem.” There wasn’t a lot of time to indoctrinate me. . . . My very first day in England I went into work just to get the car….It was a stick shift. I drove a stick shift about 15 years ago for about a month. . . . Now let’s see, a stick shift. How does that work? . . . The manager who was leaving drove me to a petrol station, filled it up for me and said, “Okay, here is your driving lesson.” So I jerked back [to the facility about a mile or two away] and he proceeded to show me where all of the little gizmos were on the car. He said, “Okay, you are on your own!” And there I was with the car and no map and 200 miles to drive that day with a stick shift sitting on the wrong side of the front seat. It was a little terrifying, a white-knuckle drive. The first few days were typical in that respect.

In myths, the purpose of the monstrous Threshold Guardians is to keep the unworthy from passing on to another region. For expatriates, they block or limit entry into the other culture. The threshold guardians expatriates experience generally fall into four categories: (1) lack of language ability; (2) cultural impermeability; (3) the tight leash of company headquarters; and (4) the restrictive nature of overseas expatriate communities. Cultural impermeability refers to the other culture’s disinclination to assimilate foreigners. The following quotation was made by an extremely well-acculturated American banker working in Japan.

We started out socializing with transient expatriates. And we ended up avoiding [them] and spending all of our time with Japanese friends or American friends among the permanent expatriate community. . . . I think it is very difficult to become friends with the Japanese. I should say that the Japanese also become very distrustful of Americans who appear too acclimated, assimilated to the country. It was interesting that we found that our proficiency in Japanese opened a number of doors to us when we first arrived, when we were first still learning. But after we learned Japanese well enough that we started to lose our American accents and where we could speak on the telephone and have other Japanese think that we were Japanese. . . . That’s when the Japanese would become distrustful. Distrustful is the wrong word. They lose their standard ways to deal with Americans. They know you can see through the facade . . . . They wonder if you have compromised your own national identity in order to learn their language so well. And that type of compromise, generically speaking, would not be well regarded among Japanese . . . it’s a very important concept to them.

Parochial corporate headquarters and overseas expatriate communities sometimes question the allegiance of expatriates who, in their eyes are too well integrated abroad; thus, at times they also function as threshold guardians.

The second part of this stage in the hero myths is called The Belly of the Whale. Like Jonah, the hero goes into a fish’s belly and comes out transformed. For expatriates, the fish’s belly represents the psychological leave-taking of their own culture and their immersion in a foreign culture. Not all expatriates throw themselves into the belly of the whale to the same extent. Their acculturation strategies vary according to the nature and degree of contact they seek with the other culture. The degree of contact determines how much of an adventure expatriates will have and the extent to which they may be transformed by the experience.
Acculturation strategies are also the basis for an expatriate pecking order. The most respected expatriates are bicultural. They speak the local language fluently, are well integrated in the local culture and perhaps the international expatriate circle, possess extensive knowledge about the other culture, and are effective at work. Two groups that are not very well respected are expatriates who "go native" (reject their own culture and embrace the host culture) and those who live in the "golden ghetto"—rejecting the local culture and idealizing their own culture (Bochner, 1982). At the bottom of this hierarchy are tourists. This pecking order conveys the message that the "ideal" expatriate makes a serious effort to acculturate and become effective in the other culture. They are helped in this endeavor by Magical Friends.

Supernatural Aid—A Magical Friend

In mythology, the magical friend, in the form of guides, teachers, ferrymen, and so forth, helps the hero on his/her journey either by explaining how to get beyond difficult obstacles or by providing assurance that the hero will not be harmed. For expatriates, Magical Friends are most commonly found in the form of cultural mentors—people from the host culture who translate that culture for expatriates and warn them of potential pitfalls. Cultural mentors are not necessarily older, but they are often people who have been expatriates themselves or who have been exposed to many expatriates. Relationships with cultural mentors often involve a mutual sharing of questions and information about both cultures. Jack, the international lawyer who quickly responded to a call to Brussels, attributed his high degree of acculturation to the cultural mentor he describes below.

And the person who became, in many respects, my mother . . . who I guess was a colleague of mine, not a contemporary in any sense of the word. She was in her early sixties when I went to Brussels . . . she adopted me, gave me untold, unsolicited advice about how I should part my hair and what clothes I should wear and what language I should speak and how deferential I should be, all sorts of things . . . . She basically looked at me in the Ugly American role and viewed it as her job to educate me into the ways in which refined people in Europe conduct themselves. And so she would take me along to luncheons and dinner parties and introduce me to all the right people and make sure that I said the right things at the right time. . . . She’s quite a character, but yes, she was my cultural mentor.

The extreme novelty and stress of entering another culture, coupled with the expatriates’ lack of knowledge about how to obtain social reinforcement in the new culture, compels them to seek help. For some, this signifies a forced return to childhood and dependency. An American engineer working in Mexico explains the role of Magical Friends in his adjustment overseas.

[The first phase of my time abroad] was “social infancy” and the biggest problem was being so dependent. And the second one was making so many mistakes. . . . [I responded to that] by just observing what happened. I listened. I asked a lot of questions of people who could translate and explain not only what had been said but why they had said it. [In the next phase] “adolescence”, I was able to identify more and more of these things but I couldn’t respond to everything. And there would be other cases where I’d either be cheated or laughed at or made fun of or used . . . and I wouldn’t even realize it! Getting into the [next-to-last phase] I call “maturity”—all the other learning curve episodes had passed. I was more in command of my situation at the plant and I was more independent out in the world and it was pretty enjoyable. The final phase I would call “autumn” although it’s a little sad. By the end I was quite able to get along and at that point, it was all cut off and you come back here.

There is a strong link between being both well acculturated and successful and having a cultural mentor. In this study, expatriates with cultural mentors tended to be more fluent in the language of their host country and typically perceived themselves as being better adapted to work and general living conditions.
abroad. They were also more aware of the paradoxes of expatriate life and received higher performance appraisal ratings from both their superiors and themselves.

The role of a Magical Friend may also be played by other Americans, experienced international residents of various nationalities, career mentors back at company headquarters, or by social or commercial networks (international schools, churches, social-athletic clubs, and business associations). Whatever form it takes, the function of Magical Friends is to provide expatriates with the necessary moral support and guidance to survive the trials and obstacles that make up the next stage in the hero’s journey.

The Road of Trials

In myths, heroes are confronted with numerous obstacles and tests on their Road of Trials. They slay dragons, elude monsters, and brave the dangers of the underworld to pass the test and win their prize or boon. Expatriates can also relate a litany of obstacles and hardships of their own that they overcome with patience, humor, and a positive attitude. Paradoxes constitute a particular form of expatriate obstacle, one that is highly significant but less well researched and articulated than the other obstacles expatriates encounter in a cross-cultural experience. Paradoxes, defined as “a situation involving the presence of contradictory, mutually exclusive elements that operate equally at the same time” (Quinn & Cameron, 1988, p.2) occur because expatriates are mediating between two cultures and two organizations.

Expatriates reported experiencing the paradoxes shown in Table I, divided into four categories: social acuity, marginality, mediation, and identity values. Social acuity paradoxes refer to the expatriate’s relationship with individual people and situations that require cultural understanding. One paradox in this category is that expatriates are at the same time both powerful and powerless. They possess a good deal of power as a result of their role at work, but at the same time, they feel they must downplay their power in order to gain the input and cooperation they need from their subordinates to do a good job. For many U.S. expatriates, the degree of power they exercise abroad is greater than that experienced in their own country, yet this power is not without constraints. Expatriates, more than other managers, are extremely dependent on subordinates for their knowledge of the local culture, which usually compels them to be more participative and concerned about gaining commitment.

Another type of social acuity paradox has to do with stereotypes and individual differences of the local people. Expatriates may see the general stereotypes about their host culture as valid; but with greater exposure to individual differences in the host culture, they also realize that many nationals do not fit those stereotypes.

The marginality paradoxes pertain to the expatriates’ relationship with the other culture as a whole. The first paradox in this category has to do with feeling both positive regard and caution about the local people. Expatriates may generally think well of the host country nationals, but at the same time they are also very savvy about being taken advantage of by them.

The second of the marginality paradoxes has to do with expatriates’ feeling at ease anywhere but belonging nowhere. Becoming comfortable in other countries often means sacrificing an unconscious sense of fit within one’s own culture. Peter Adler (1974) describes “multicultural man” as being neither part of nor totally apart from his culture, but living on the boundary between the two. This theme, heard repeatedly among bicultural people, is, in a sense, the price one sometimes pays for leaving home and adapting to another culture.

I have become a queer mixture of the East and the West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere . . . I am a stranger and alien in the West. I cannot be of it. But in my own country also, sometimes, I have an exile’s feeling. —Nehru

The mediation paradoxes refer to the conflicting demands that expatriates often experience in their roles as mediators, boundary spanners, and goodwill ambassadors for their
The first of these paradoxes is that expatriates feel caught between the contradictory demands of headquarters and the host country nationals and the local situation. This relates to role conflict—the multiple loyalties they must satisfy—and the difficulty of mediating between two organizations. Role conflict is caused by a lack of integrated goals between corporate headquarters and its subsidiary or when these two entities have different ways of operating and do not understand each other’s culture. Executives at corporate headquarters sometimes ask expatriates to do things that are unacceptable or inappropriate in the foreign culture. For example, executives from one corporate headquarters insisted that expatriate managers in a Latin American company take a harshly competitive rather than a collaborative stance with a local union. The expatriates argued that the union leaders were sympathetic to the company’s economic situation and that hardball actions were not appropriate for the local culture. Headquarters insisted; in response, the union elected Marxist leaders who greatly disliked the company, and management-labor relations further disintegrated.

Another mediation paradox occurs when expatriates are representing both ideal and real values. Expatriates often feel they are trying to represent their company as best they can in order to succeed; at the same time they also realize that the “ideal” values they act out abroad may not exist back at headquarters.

I think that you like every customer to feel as though he or she is number one on your list . . . but certainly there are customers who are higher in the pecking order. We are part-owned by American companies . . . and they are paying to be that number one priority. Therefore, all of the European customers that I had . . . abroad come somewhere in the second order.
The last of the mediation paradoxes occurs when expatriates are both free and not free of cultural norms. Expatriates may feel they are freed from many of their own cultural rules and even from some of the host culture’s norms, but they are not free at all from certain host country customs that they must observe in order to be effective abroad. A general manager who managed a European division noted that, “If you make a social gaffe, then people tend to allow it more because you are a foreigner, but they also watch out of the corner of the eye to see . . . How does he perform in a social setting? How does he perform in a business setting?” Going abroad may feel like “slipping one’s leash”, but if one fails to discern where the boundaries of that freedom end, censure or isolation results. For example, the Japanese forgive most social faux pas when foreigners appear to be well intentioned and do not speak the language. They do not, however, tolerate public displays of anger or embarrassing one’s superior. Every culture has some rules that are absolutes, what Cateora (1983) calls “cultural imperatives”. Expatriates who see only freedom will invariably transgress important cultural norms thereby inhibiting their effectiveness.

The Identity Values Paradoxes relate to identification and personal boundaries. They help us understand what happens to expatriate value systems when they are exposed to the values of another culture. One paradox in this category occurs when expatriates feel they are both relinquishing and strengthening their values at the same time. For example, they give up some of their U.S. cultural ideas and behaviors in order to be accepted or successful in the other culture; at the same time they find some of their core U.S. values becoming even stronger as a result of exposure to another culture. This paradox captures the basic dilemma of identity and acculturation—how much of one’s identity (or values) must be given up in order to be accepted by the other culture?

A marketing executive who served as the managing director of a European manufacturing and sales division in Belgium described this paradox in the following terms.

What did I give up? I never wanted to know something about French wines, but I felt that I ought to know something about them in Europe. Becoming stern and tough because this is what the Germans like. I even could tell I was imitating the French guys . . . waving my hands because they did it. I’ll do it if that’s what they want. . . . The American values that became stronger were my belief in individual freedom. I think I became much more of a patriot after being over there . . . I’d say that is the biggest one. . . . I [also] have a new respect, a different feeling about religion. . . . I think my religious values have become stronger after being there and seeing the coldness of things.

Another paradox in the identity values category concerns the macro/micro perspective that expatriates experience. At the same time that they feel themselves becoming more and more “world-minded” as a result of exposure to different values and conflicting loyalties, they also become more idiosyncratic as to how they put together their own value system and views on life. Peter Adler (1974) alluded to this paradox involving personal boundaries.

Where the configuration of loyalties and identification is constantly in flux and where boundaries are never secure, multicultural man [and presumably woman] lays himself open to any and all kind of stimuli. In the face of messages which are confusing, contradictory, or overwhelming, the individual is thrown back on his own subjectivity with which he must integrate and sort out what he allows himself to take in (p.373).

One expatriate who worked in Venezuela with an accounting firm talked about becoming idiosyncratic: “I think I have changed in that way. I have sort of created somebody. Not intentionally, I don’t think, but I think that is what happened.” How do expatriates “create somebody?” Long-term expatriates speak of adopting values or practices from other cultures that they find lacking in their own. As one expatriate said, “You find you start picking parts of different cultures that you like and saying, ‘Gee, I wish we could have all of these together.”’ For example, while still adhering to the basic core of their Christian beliefs, some expatriates also
incorporate “the best parts” of other religions to which they were exposed.

The more involved expatriates are in the other culture, the more likely they are to experience the paradoxes identified here, thus it takes a certain level of acculturation before paradoxes become apparent. With greater acculturation, some paradoxes cease to be an obstacle once expatriates gain a better understanding of the contingencies that surround the paradox. The situation determines which side of the paradox they will act upon. Other paradoxes simply require the acceptance that accompanies greater acculturation and tolerance. The ability to perceive paradoxes is one of many boons of the expatriate experience.

The Ultimate Boon

In this stage, mythical heroes penetrate to a source of power, transforming themselves in the process, and receive a boon as a reward. The source of power for expatriates is a bicultural perspective, increased self-awareness, and the knowledge that they had the inner resources to master a difficult situation. Like the mythical heroes in this stage, expatriates make sacrifices, move from a state of dependence to independence, and discover within themselves hidden resources and skills. The adventure evokes qualities of their characters they did not know they possessed.

Both mythical heroes and expatriates change as a result of their journey. In myths, the consciousness is transformed by exposure to trials or illuminating revelations. With expatriates, the consciousness is transformed by exposure to cultural differences, trials, and paradox, aided at times by explanations from cultural mentors. Expatriates describe their own transformation process in terms of “letting go” and “taking on” (see Table II).

During their sojourn, expatriates who are concerned about acculturation and being effective at work “let go” of cultural certainty and “take on” the perceptions of the other culture. They let go of an unquestioned acceptance of basic cultural assumptions and

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<th>LETTING GO</th>
<th>TAKING ON</th>
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<td>Cultural certainty</td>
<td>Internalized perceptions of the other culture; increased patriotism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unquestioned acceptance of basic assumptions</td>
<td>Internalized values of the other culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal frames of reference</td>
<td>New or broader schemas so that differences are accepted without a need to compare them to back-home customs or objects</td>
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<td>Unexamined life</td>
<td>Constructed life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accustomed role or status</td>
<td>Role assigned by the other culture or one’s job</td>
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<td>Social reinforcement knowledge</td>
<td>Accepting and learning the other culture’s social norms and behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accustomed habits and activities</td>
<td>Substituting functional equivalents</td>
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<td>Habitual, known routines</td>
<td>Addiction to novelty and learning</td>
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take on the internalized values of the other culture. Relinquishing their own cultural frame of reference, they create new frames of reference that no longer involve negative comparisons with things at home. They let go of the unexamined life in favor of a constructed or composed life. They yield their accustomed roles and status and take on the roles assigned to them. They admit that their knowledge about social reinforcement (the social cues that result in expected behavior) is not effective in the other culture and adapt themselves to the local norms. They give up their accustomed habits and activities and make do with functional equivalents that serve the same purpose. And finally, they relinquish their known routines and take on an addiction to novelty and learning.

Living in another culture is a transformational experience. When asked how they changed overseas, expatriates listed positive changes in themselves, changed attitudes, improved work skills, increased knowledge, and closer family relationships. The personal change they experience affects their efforts to fit back into a former life when they are repatriated.

The Return

Crossing the return threshold and coming home can be very difficult for both mythical heroes and expatriates. Both return from a life-changing experience that is hard to share with those who have not undergone a similar experience. Sometimes they are perceived as heroes when they return, sometimes they are not. Regardless, the transformation and adaptation they have experienced during their journey often make it hard for them to readjust to their former lives.

Campbell (1968) described some mythical heroes as “rescued from without,” forced by external forces to end their adventure. In like manner, some expatriates were called back by their companies to the States before their tour of duty had expired or before their projects were completed. They complained that after only 18 to 24 months abroad, they were just beginning to be acculturated and effective. The severe disappointment of these early repatriees can be attributed to their unmet expectations and inability to realize the personal and professional goals they had set for their time overseas. They found it irritating to have their plans disrupted and to leave without harvesting the fruits of their labor. When the “rescued from without” expatriates talked about their repatriation, it sounded like a period of grieving. Thus, the normal challenges of repatriation are compounded when expatriates are brought back before their expected tour of duty is completed.

A majority (57 percent) of the expatriates in this study described repatriation as difficult, even more difficult than going abroad for some (9 percent). The stories of expatriates who sang the repatriation blues contained the following themes:

1. The “You Can’t Go Home Again” phenomenon that occurs when people try to fit themselves back into a former life
2. The “Little Fish in a Big Pond” syndrome
3. The readjustment to decreased autonomy
4. The high degree of uncertainty regarding the job or the move
5. The lack of interest in their experiences
6. The idealization of home and false expectations about what repatriation will be like
7. The testing period in which expatriates are expected to prove they can also be successful back home and that they have not changed too much abroad
8. Missing life abroad

Repatriation seems to be less problematic the second time around when expatriates have more realistic expectations about returning to their country and when they use the same entry skills for their own culture that proved successful overseas.

Repatriation is also made easier for expatriates who receive a hero’s welcome, returning to companies that value their experience and quickly utilize the skills and knowledge A majority of the expatriates in this study described repatriation as difficult, even more difficult than going abroad for some.
they acquired abroad. Nevertheless, only two-thirds of this sample reported that they were permitted to use the skills they learned abroad. Some were demoted or assigned to a lateral position upon their return, which resulted in bitterness. Certainly a promotion would be more in keeping with the mastery and heroism the expatriate experience seems to evoke in most people.

Lessons for Companies

Retaining employees with international skills is a serious problem since approximately 20 percent of expatriates resign after repatriation (Adler, 1981; Black & Gregersen, 1991). Companies are more likely to retain employees if they understand the subjective experience of expatriates and facilitate the hero’s journey of their employees as they pass through each stage. The most important lessons for companies include:

• Selecting people with a strong desire to go abroad who are seeking adventure
• Understanding that expatriates may be off-balance at this time and not contributing unwittingly to the uncertainty of the first months
• Removing threshold guardians that preclude acculturation (by, for example, providing effective language training)
• Providing cultural mentors and headquarters sponsors
• Acknowledging that expatriates have changed abroad and utilizing the boons they bring home
• Removing the uncertainty about repatriation arrangements
• According expatriates a hero’s welcome by recognizing and utilizing their expertise
• Understanding that expatriates have probably changed to adapt to the demands made upon them overseas
• Assigning them a challenging domestic job that allow them to use the skills developed overseas and that requires the continuous learning they enjoyed abroad
• Learning from the company’s successes and failures with expatriates by benchmarking the practices of other organizations.

Companies need to understand that living abroad was the most significant experience of many expatriates’ lives. When the expatriates in this study were asked whether they would return abroad given the chance, 60 percent emphatically replied “yes”, and only six percent answered “no.” (The remaining 34 percent said going abroad again would depend upon the job, location, and their family.) Their reasons for returning overseas describe the essence of the experience for them. They miss the opportunity to learn new things, the excitement, feeling “special”, more alive, and more challenged—all characteristics of a mythical hero’s journey. The metaphor of the myth of the hero’s journey helps expatriates look beyond the physical journey to the transformational journey inward that they share with other expatriates on the mythical “hero path”.

Furthermore, we have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we will come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we will be one with the world.

—Joseph Campbell

_Hero With a Thousand Faces_
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REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1. Joseph Campbell, renowned expert on mythology, studied myths from all over the world and identified their common plots and stages. The hero’s adventure is one of the most common myths.
2. This list of paradoxes was developed with Dr. Ashjorn Osland. All the paradoxes were reported by 46 to 77% of the expatriates studied; each expatriate experienced an average of 5.4 paradoxes.