

AMA Leader's Edge Newsletter

Building an “Immigration-Friendly” Company

Companies are no longer just employers when it comes to their relationship with personnel working abroad and immigrant employees. They are also interpreters, ambassadors and family counselor. As the global competition for workers heats up and quality employees grow ever more scarce, companies are finding it necessary to develop an immigration support strategy to lure top talent.

Providing expatriate employees with the necessary resources to navigate the bureaucratic and cultural mazes of their adopted country has become a critical function for business. “More and more companies are trying to put themselves in the shoes of the individual” to ease the difficulties of adjusting to a new country, says Angelo Paparelli, principal of the immigration law specialty firm Paparelli & Partners and two-time recipient of The International Who's Who of Business Lawyers' World's Leading Lawyer for Corporate Immigration Law award.

Historically, companies have largely negotiated the challenges of international labor law on a case-by-case, country-by-country basis, says Paparelli. This piecemeal solution, unsupported by a corporate-wide framework, left much of the burden of dealing with day-to-day problems to the employee. Now, however, the trend is toward an approach that Paparelli terms “global migration management”—the adoption of a centralized set of standards designed to help streamline the migration process.

The emergence of global migration management is underscored by the 11th annual Global Relocation Trends Survey. Conducted and issued jointly by GMAC Global Relocation Services, the National Foreign Trade Council, and the Society for Human Resource Management, the survey found that 67 percent of the surveyed companies used global standards in their relocation policy.

The practice of global migration management goes far beyond helping employees fill out legal paperwork, according to Paparelli. It entails a cultural shift in which companies place employees' overall welfare at the heart of a full-fledged support strategy. Properly executed, global migration management benefits companies with an “immigration-friendly” brand that gives them an edge in recruiting top foreign talent.

One of the hallmarks of a successful global migration management approach, is the willingness to look at the employee's family holistically. The Global Relocation Trends Survey found that family concerns were by far the most common cause of dissatisfaction among expatriate employees, with 67 percent of respondents citing it as their reason for returning home. The survey also found that one major factor in such concerns was the inability of spouses to find employment in their adopted country. So, Paparelli advises, companies should offer help to a spouse obtain a work permit or even hire him or her.

Access to information is another crucial aspect of a successful global migration management program. Immigrant employees need the ability to stay updated on the status of their case. One way to provide this service, says Paparelli, is to create a dedicated section on the company intranet where employees can review their case, consult an FAQ list, and educate themselves on related issues.

Bob Kustka, president of CHR Partners, an HR consulting firm in Norwell, MA, offers five further suggestions for building an immigration-friendly brand to attract top international talent:

1. Allow more time off. A two-week vacation is usually not enough time to travel home and visit with their families, so companies need to be more flexible with time-off policies. One strategy is to create an International Home Leave Program that allows immigrant employees to bank holiday and sick days for overseas travel. Another option is to give such employees more flex time to work virtually when they are in their home country.

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2. Offer airfare discounts. The cost of flying back and forth to see family can be expensive, and homesickness is one of the leading reasons why many immigrants decide not to stay. One way around this is to establish a corporate account with an air travel provider that allows immigrant employees and their family members to get discounted rates.

3. Sponsor citizenship. The process of becoming a naturalized citizen is such a hassle that many employees will rather leave than deal with the paperwork. Some companies sponsor immigrant employees, setting them up with immigration lawyers to help the process move more easily. A word of caution: This can be costly, timely and in the end, there's no guarantee that an employee will stay with you once a Green Card is obtained.

4. Make it feel more like home. This may seem like a small point, but immigrant employees miss the food and creature comforts of their culture. Companies can help remedy this by having an International Food Day in the cafeteria every once in a while.

5. Provide tuition reimbursement. Immigrant employees value education and want to continue developing transferable skills in their area of expertise, so offer tuition reimbursement.

Investing in a robust immigrant support strategy can pay big dividends for companies seeking to expand their international horizons. Give immigrant employees what they need to succeed, and they'll become intrepid explorers opening up new territories for your business.