

8 Tips for Expats to Get the Most Out of Russia

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Two decades may have passed since Russia began opening up to foreign business, yet the expat-versus-local debate in the workplace shows no sign of disappearing.

While the hardship allowances for Russia have become largely a thing of the past, the popular misconception among Russian staff remains — that expats get paid much more than “locals” do. But our salary surveys show that in senior positions, there is almost no disparity in incomes. What distorts the numbers, however, is the accompanying package that expats often receive when they are relocated to Russia. In many cases, these are very generous — housing allowances, flights home, a personal driver, schooling for children. In most cases, the “extras” cost significantly more than the expat’s salary, and this begs the question: Is a company getting value for money in bringing expats to Russia in the first place?

Foreign assignments vary in length, but it is usually in the range of three to four years. This is no small task for expats, particularly if they have a family and need to uproot every couple of

years. Obviously their main asset is a strong understanding of the internal workings of their particular company, even if they know nothing about the country they have just arrived in and their mandate is to keep the business going according to head office's wishes, or in some cases to eventually replace themselves with locals.

Even large multinationals employ very few foreigners as a percentage of the overall work force. But despite their small numbers, there can be resentment as to how effective they really are in relation to their pay. The common perception is that it takes new expats a year to adjust to life in Russia, settle their families and get their feet off the ground. This is followed by a year trying to reverse the mistakes of their predecessors, followed by a year trying to work out where they are being sent next.

If you are a recent arrival to Russia, here are a few tips on how to make the country the most memorable posting of your career:

1. Russians tend to be very well educated and highly knowledgeable in areas of culture, politics and geography. In fact, the average Russian probably knows more about your country's history and literature than you do. What some lack — and this is due to 70 years of communism — is the commercial acumen acquired purely by growing up in a free-market, capitalist society. Whatever you do, don't ever take the moral high ground of "we know how to do things better because our country is richer." This will be taken for exactly what it is arrogance. The current economic downturn affecting much of the developed world shows that not everything back home works to perfection.
2. Unless you have studied Russian or worked in the former Soviet republics before, you are unlikely to master much Russian during your assignment, especially if, as many are, you are confined to the "expat bubble" — living in expat-dominated "enclaves" and drinking at expat-dominated pubs. But as few people outside of the corporate world speak much English, even just learning the Cyrillic alphabet and mastering a few basic pleasantries will make life a whole lot easier, particularly as signs are often in Russian only. Just as London and New York are not representative of Britain and the United States, Moscow is a world away from much of the rest of Russia. You are unlikely to go heli-skiing in Kamchatka in your first month, but taking a few weekend trips to neighboring cities will give you an insight into how different the lives of most Russians are from those in your Moscow office. St. Petersburg is the obvious starter, but Vladimir and Suzdal are closer and equally worth the trip.
3. Read up as much as you can before and during your stay on Russian and Soviet history. In addition, be sure to study a map so you know that Omsk and Tomsk are relative neighbors, but Krasnodar and Krasnoyarsk are not. Also, remember that Russia is not a homogenous country with more than 100 different nationalities. If your firm has operations in neighboring CIS countries, at least be able to tell the difference between a Kazakh and a Cossack.
4. Basic tasks such as purchasing car insurance, which in the West can be done online or by telephone, often need a personal visit and, unfortunately, often during the working day. When your Russian subordinates and colleagues need to apply for a new passport, this means a personal trip to the Federal Security Service in the town where they are registered, which could be the other side of the country and might take several days. Be flexible and allow time off for such matters as there is no getting around it.

5. The bane of the majority of expatriate managers is when Russian employees take copious time off for sickness. This is a hard battle to win. The most common solution is to allot only five or 10 days a year to employees for paid sick days.
6. Just because Russians do not smile all the time does not mean that they are angry, miserable or that they do not like you. Someone with a permanent smile in Russia is akin to the village idiot, but when Russians do smile at you, they tend to be more sincere.
7. Avoid making the usual mistake of preferring mediocre staff with good English over stronger employees whose spoken level of English is not quite up to strength. Remember that the vast majority of their work will be done in Russian. They will communicate with colleagues, partners and clients in their own language. Russians often read and write English considerably better than they speak it, due largely to the educational system and also a lack of practice.
8. The Russian friends you make will regularly criticize their country but will be very offended if they hear it from you. Instead of dwelling on the negative, you should try to pay more attention to the positive aspects of Russia, why you enjoy living and working here. The more cultural snippets that you can pick up for example, giving flowers to women on their birthday, but an odd number only, not shaking hands through a doorway, saying a toast when it is your turn as vodka shots are raised the more you will be appreciated.

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