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Avoiding Moscow's Expat Cull

By Luc Jones

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An increasing number of our recruitment projects are replacements either for underperforming staff or involve management looking to reduce expenditure. Let's face it, there's not exactly a huge amount of growth in the Russian economy so cost efficiency is very much the order of the day.

Many expatriates have already found themselves "surplus to requirements," and if your direct boss arrives in Moscow without warning then this is almost certainly a very bad sign, by which time it's probably too late. Another possible red warning flag includes your input or opinion on business matters involving your remit no longer being asked for and regular meetings with your superior suddenly being canceled, postponed or delegated.

Cost is also a crucial factor. If you are paid in dollars or euros, then you have essentially become twice as expensive in the past year. Or put another way, a local could be recruited on a ruble salary for considerably less, and that's before you even begin to take into account the generous living allowances which often come with such expat packages.

Even if your office's revenues have remained stable in ruble terms, you may find yourself

of increasing interest to the bean counters back in the head office finance department and will need to be able to justify your position.

There is also a danger when a new CEO or regional director is appointed, especially when their mandate is to make wholesale changes to the organization. Remember that if the Russian office isn't a significant contributor to regional or global revenue, it could be viewed as a potential liability from a political point of view. If the new guy in charge is not familiar with Russia, he may feel that politically it's easier just to shut up shop than explain why the business continues to operate.

Nevertheless, there are a number of steps you can take to secure your position.

1. Engage more with your regional management, not just your direct boss. Invite them out to Moscow and include some extracurricular activities. Show them that the Western media's negative image of an aggressive and dangerous Russia is more an exaggerated fantasy than a reality. Involve your local staff, so they can hear it from the horse's mouth rather than just from you. The success of many multinationals in Russia has occurred when regional managers have a direct interest in promoting this part of the world within their company rather than it just being a dot on the map out in the east.

2. Make the effort to travel to your company's headquarters and network with your peers, rather than simply interacting with them by e-mail or during your weekly conference call. Talk up the situation in Russia and outline some of the positives that can be achieved during a downturn, such as gaining market share.

3. Assure your company's board that the key to ensuring success in Russia is to be here for the long term, and you are the safe pair of hands required to steady the ship during troubled times. You are loyal to the firm and understand the inner workings of the organization, and unlike a newcomer, you don't have and won't have your own agenda.

One piece of good news at the very least is that if you are an expat executive in Russia reading this, and you are still in a job, you've almost certainly proved that your services are required here on the ground. Do your best to stick around — the expat community in Moscow needs you!

Luc Jones is a partner with Antal Russia, a British executive recruitment consultancy present in the CIS since 1994, and employing over 100 staff in offices in Moscow, Kazan and Almaty.

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