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More employees getting international experience

Companies expanding overseas send increasing number of workers abroad to gain a global perspective

By Jane M. Von Bergen The Philadelphia Inquirer

PHILADELPHIA — Wow, Malcolm Dahn thought, this is really odd.

Dahn, 41, a partner in the accounting firm KPMG LLP, happened to peer inside a conference room around noon at one of his company's offices and what he saw blew his mind.

"There were literally 15 to 20 people in an audit room, taking a nap," he said, still marveling. "They would take a nap in plain view — all these people, people in their cubicles."

Dahn told this story last month in KPMG's Philadelphia office, where they jokingly call him "Mr. International," but the memory comes from the three years he spent at KPMG's office in Seoul, South Korea, where naps at noon are part of accepted corporate culture.

Dahn is part of an expanding group of U.S. workers — employees with significant international experience and a broader perspective at a time when the world is growing smaller and an increasing number of companies operate in many nations.

"We're seeing, despite the economy in the United States, a lot of U.S. firms expanding overseas because, frankly, there are better economic opportunities for them abroad," said Geoffrey Latta, executive vice president of Orc Worldwide, a New York consulting company specializing in international employment practices.

Not only are companies increasing the percentage of workers that they are sending abroad, but they are also requiring international experience as a prerequisite to leadership positions. And, they are fielding more applications from recent graduates, fresh from semesters abroad, who put a high premium on global opportunities.

"Our clients are global, and we want to make sure that we have our professionals at least as global as our clients," said Aidan Walsh, KPMG's partner in charge of international deployment.

Of its global workforce of about 120,000, KPMG now has about 2,500 on foreign assignment.

The company wants to increase that to 5,000 by 2010, aiming to have 25 percent to 30 percent of its professional staff with international experience at some point.

"It teaches our people a whole raft of new understandings," said Walsh, in New York. "It helps them to realize that the U.S. doesn't have a lock on all the great ideas of the world."

Here's what's happening, based on Orc Worldwide's 2006 survey, its most recent.

1/3 Companies have doubled the number of employees they've sent abroad.

1/3 Western European countries send the most workers abroad, mostly to other Western European companies.

1/3 Companies develop international human resources policies themselves, but turn to outside vendors to handle logistical issues such as relocation, tax planning, visas and cultural orientation.

1/3 Most U.S. postings are for up to three years, but there is a trend toward shorter assignments.

1/3 Worldwide, 85 percent of those sent abroad are male.

1/3 Manufacturing, financial services and computer companies send the most workers abroad. The least? Leisure, advertising, nonprofit, retail and construction businesses.

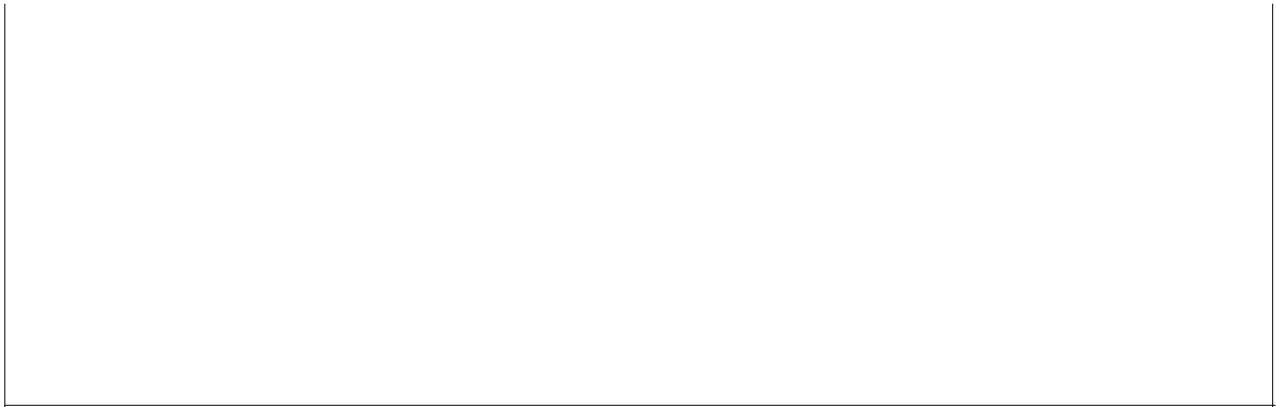
Building international bench strength is not cheap, said Penny Stoker, vice president of global human resources services for

AstraZeneca P.L.C. in Wilmington.

Typically, she said, it costs two to four times an employee's annual salary to cover expenses.

That is why, she said, the company focuses its international assignments on those scheduled for advancement.





JONATHAN WILSON/PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER/MCT A growing number of U.S. employees have significant international experience, including Malcolm Dahn, left, and Kevin Croy, at the Philadelphia KPMG office.