

Definition of flexpatriates



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In the existing literature, different approaches exist to define flexpatriation. The variety is emphasized by diverse expressions for the same term such as frequent flyer (Petrovic et al., 2000) or international business traveller (Welch & Worm, 2006). The characteristics lying behind those names, however, are similar. In the following, the term flexpatriate will be used. This also has the advantage of achieving a clear distinction towards the terminology of “ frequent flyer” programs. Moreover, the prefix “ flex-” demonstrates the dominant characteristic of being a flexible “ expatriate”. Flexibility in this context does not only refer to flexibility regarding the destination but also regarding rhythm, scheduling and planning of travel (Mayerhofer et al., 2004a).²⁵ To achieve a first overview of the terminology flexpatriation, it is useful to analyze one of the broadest approaches in understanding this term made by Teng (2005). Highlighting the current development regarding IAs, Teng states “[...] we no longer talk in terms of expats but flex-pats” (Teng, 2005, online source). That is to say, in general, IAs require flexibility which is offered by flexpatriates. Teng defines flexpatriates as “[...] a new breed of younger expatriates who have fewer encumbrances and are more enthusiastic to work abroad” (Teng, 2005, online source). A more pragmatic approach was developed by Welch and Worm (2006). They define flexpatriates “[...] one for whom business travel is an essential component of their work” (Welch and Worm, 2006, p. 284). Aligned with this is the definition of Petrovic et al. (2000) who identify a flexpatriate as an “[...] employee who undertakes frequent international business trips but does not relocate” (Petrovic et al., 2000, p. 20). The following aspects elaborate further on flexpatriation and therefore give a tighter definition. Mayerhofer (2010) characterizes flexpatriates additionally

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as flexible employees who have a permanent position in their home country while fulfilling parts of their job abroad without relocating. Normally, a flexpatriate's travel assignment includes trips to various countries. These trips abroad are normally without company by family and lead to an unclear separation between work and non-work areas. In contrast, commuters are employed in a country other than their country of residence and fulfil their whole job abroad. Flexpatriates take a trip to other nations and experience, firstly, different cultures, and secondly, isolation from their family and private life. They can be found in all kind of industries and different hierarchical levels (Mayerhofer et al., 2004a; Mayerhofer, 2010; Welch & Worm, 2006). Characteristics that are significant for defining flexpatriate assignments are their duration, irregularity and purpose. Assignments that fall within the definition of a flexpatriate assignment last less than a week and do not include any kind of relocating neither the assignee's family nor the assignees themselves. Furthermore, assignments are triggered 26 internally for a purpose within the same company as discussed in 2. 2. 2. 1 (Mayerhofer, 2010; Mayerhofer, 2004a; Petrovic et al., 2000). Flexpatriates appear to be more an exception in comparison to the entire workforce. This is emphasized due to the fact that companies do not seem to know how to manage flexpatriates appropriately. Moreover, literature highlights the fact that the normal work routine at their home office continues while they travel (Mayerhofer, 2010; Mayerhofer, 2004a; Collings et al., 2007). As can be seen by the definitions given, all authors stress on the element of frequent travelling in explaining flexpatriation and flexpatriates. However, these definitions also have in common that they do not explicitly state which volume of travel qualifies an employee as a flexpatriate. " Frequent"

however is defined as “ happening often; regular” (Pons, 2011, online source) and “ occurring or done many times at short intervals” (Wordreference, 2011, online source). In order for employees to fulfil the definition of flexpatriate entirely, they should fulfil the definition of “ frequent”. In the following chapter, characteristics related to flexpatriate assignments are going to be identified. Companies should consider these special requirements when managing their flexpatriates. This is why, in a next step, it is investigated if these particularities are considered in the policies of MNCs. To start with, the author therefore discusses the key characteristics of flexpatriates.