

Furniture and Household Goods: Ship, Store, or Sell?

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Since the idea of going abroad for one year (or three) usually means facing the unknown, many expatriates and their family members want to bring along as much of their household goods and furnishings as possible to make their new house feel like home. But this idea is not always best for a number of reasons. The housing market in your assignment location may offer very few unfurnished residences, which would make the majority of your furnishings superfluous and the house or apartment cluttered. And, in addition, your company's policy is likely to restrict the furniture and appliances you can take along – again, for practical reasons.

When it comes time to move, you essentially have three options: You can ship your home-country furniture and household items overseas, store them in a safe storage facility, or sell those items that are no longer necessary (and make room for any new items you bring back home with you). A closer look at the options – and what drives them – will help your move go smoother.

The Employer's Point of View: Are There Moving Limitations?

A key step in your relocation process, with regards to the actual move, is finding out whether or not your employer has set limits on what you can ship to the host country. Many companies do set up some type of guideline, particularly for shipping furniture and household goods. These limits, which may be defined by weight or volume, may vary if you are moving into a furnished or unfurnished house or apartment. Some companies also

permit a small (and reasonable) portion of your personal effects to be shipped as excess baggage by air.

Many companies typically use a preferred moving company (or two) and require an inventory of items you would like to ship overseas. The inventory serves two purposes:

- As a checklist in the event of loss or damage, the inventory helps to avoid confusion and errors when it comes to insurance matters.
- The inventory provides human resources with the opportunity to approve (or reject) items the family wishes to bring. The articles most often ineligible for shipment are:
 - Pets
 - Antiques
 - Valuable paintings
 - Collectibles
 - Planes
 - Boats
 - Trailers
 - Firearms
 - Pianos
 - Large shop tools
 - Cars (most companies provide no assistance in shipping cars; some offer no help selling a family car or disposing of a leased vehicle)

In most instances, HR coordinates your interaction with the shipping company, and the vendor then handles all aspects of moving your goods:

- Air and surface shipments
- Customs clearance in the host country

- Insurance
- Delivery
- Storage of goods in the home country

Both your employer – and the moving company – want your move to be as stress-free and problem-free as possible.

The Family's Point of View: Is Storage a Better Option? Or Selling?

Since the dangers of breakage are greater when goods are shipped over long distances, whether by air, land, or sea, you should consider storing necessary, but valuable, items (e.g., fine china and glassware) at home, rather than bringing them to the assignment location. To make your decision easier, many organizations pay for the storage of your furniture and other personal effects in the home country, as well as provide some financial assistance with renting or buying furniture in the host location.

As with shipping, some employers restrict what or how much may be stored. For example, employers often will not pay for the storage of personal cars, which require constant attention to maintain their condition and operation – particularly antique autos.

The last option – selling some items – may prove advantageous in the long run. Go through your household goods and sell off those items that are no longer necessary, wanted, or useful – particularly if the assignment is going to be long-term or indefinite. As an added bonus, not only are you de-cluttering your home but earning extra money from the sale of goods.

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Practical Steps to Avoid Unnecessary Moving Stress

- If any of the items you wish to ship overseas are questionable, HR will probably discuss it with you. If you decide to bring that item along, anyway, or exceed the restricted weight or volume amount for the rest of your goods, most companies will hold you responsible for paying the excess costs for shipping, insurance, and customs clearance. So, save yourself some money and consider whether or not you really need that item in the host country.
- Split the transfer of household goods between air shipment (arrival within two weeks) for personal belongings and items you would rather not do without (e.g., baby crib, clothing) and surface shipment (arrival within four to six weeks) for larger items that are not needed immediately.
- Don't forget, most of what you bring overseas will return home with you, in addition to all those new items you purchased during the assignment. Most employers allow you to increase the amount that may be shipped back home to account for any accumulation of purchases while on assignment – with the understanding that if you exceed the restrictions, the extra cost will come out of your pocket. With that in mind, consider the options again: ship or sell.

Tough Decisions

If your employer pays all actual – and reasonable – shipping costs of household furnishings, keep the word “reasonable” in mind when deciding what to bring, what to leave behind, and what to sell. (See sidebar, “Practical Steps to Avoid Unnecessary Moving Stress.”) Each family must decide what those choices will be. After all, what might comfort a worried child or adult and bring a sense of normalcy to a strange situation (especially at the start of the assignment) will differ.

But, just in case, be prepared to pay any costs that exceed the company guidelines. The bottom line essentially translates into a balancing act between what the company can afford and what your family needs.

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