

BUSINESS LIFECYCLE

Working with your team, abroad

Learn how to successfully build and maintain business relationships overseas.



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Expanding your business into new international markets or hiring overseas suppliers means building relationships and a new team. You'll need to find the right partners, understand local laws, and develop communication and management strategies for a diverse workforce. Fortunately, there are numerous resources available to help you succeed.

Choosing a vendor location and strategy

The U.S. Department of Commerce publishes [country commercial guides](#) that provide a political and economic overview of potential export markets, guidance for selling U.S. products and services, and details about each country's banking system and business customs.

For importing, there are several options. You might choose to work with a manufacturer, hire a distributor, or buy directly from independent craftspeople.

When exporting, you can sell directly or indirectly. If you choose indirect selling, you can use an intermediary that will find buyers, ship products, and collect payment. U.S. wholesalers can buy merchandise from you and resell it in international markets. For a fee, e-commerce platforms like Amazon or Alibaba will stock your products in their distribution centers.

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Hire local partners

When choosing a foreign representative or distributor, gather details about the company's track record, and consider its operations and growth potential. Ask about the territory it covers, the size of

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the sales team, compensation policies, and facilities and equipment.

The U.S. Commercial Service, which has offices across the country, provides information about finding and evaluating overseas representatives, distributors, resellers, and partners. You can also find agents through government embassies and their websites. It can be helpful to reach out to business partners or contacts in your network who are familiar with the market.

Understand employment laws

As your international business grows, you may decide you need to hire or expand a local employee network that works exclusively for your company.

In the U.S., employment can be structured as “at will,” which means either the employer or the employee can terminate the relationship at any time. That generally is not the case abroad. The country where your new employees work may require you to show “just cause” for termination, following specific processes. It’s a good idea to have [a local attorney](#) in that market review the employment contract.

When you offer a letter of employment, it must state the international employee’s salary in the local currency. If you pay in U.S. dollars, exchange-rate fluctuations could reduce the employee’s income from one month to the next, which isn’t permitted without the employee’s approval. Local laws also may require you to provide specific numbers of days for vacation time and sick leave. And some countries mandate an increased salary rate during vacation. These requirements can add to your employment costs.

Manage and communicate across regions

Compared to the workforce in the U.S., fewer employees in international markets are likely to be exempt from overtime. That makes it important to use time and attendance software to track employee work hours.

If your business is working across time zones, consider how you will hand off information and tasks so that as one group of employees finishes the workday, another group is ready to pick up and continue seamlessly.

While much international business today can be handled via phone calls and online, there’s no substitute for face-to-face meetings. Schedule travel periodically to see your overseas employees, a practice that will build trust and help managers understand local business customs and challenges.

Developing international partnerships and teams requires careful research and planning, but with the right people on board, you can successfully expand your business opportunities.

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