

EXPAT: WHAT ABOUT THE SPOUSE?

December, 2003

All too often a foreign assignment fails because the expatriate's family cannot adjust to a new environment it considers alien and hostile. In many such cases the expatriate might ask for an early repatriation and – if this request is turned down – decide to quit his/her job. Of course the repatriation will then be an unhappy process: beyond the failure of his assignment, it means that the returnee may have to look for a new job not only for himself but also for his spouse. On the other hand, if the expatriate decided to hold on to his assignment, this could cause serious tensions in his family, and these might, in turn, lead to separation or divorce: the psychological stress could range from discouragement to depression for either or both spouses, and ultimately result in an early repatriation.

Quite evidently, such failures can be quite costly, also in terms of the family's expectations, and the efforts it may have made to try to adjust to the new environment. There are not many alternatives to avoid such a waste: the couple will – with the support of the expatriate's DRH – have to find ways to ensure that the spouse can adjust and develop in the foreign setting: indeed, a harmonious family life is one of the basic prerequisites for the success of a foreign assignment.

1. Two major challenges

(a) Tensions in the couple

When one of the spouses is offered a foreign assignment, this is often seen as a chance to strengthen the marital bonds by a new, long honeymoon. Alas, this is more often than not an illusion. An expatriation is generally far from a romantic holiday in an exotic setting. All too often day-to-day practical problems are multiplied in an unfamiliar country and culture; molehills become mountains, and tensions within the couple are exacerbated. If one adds to this the adjustment problems experienced by and for the children, the scenario can look quite grim...especially so if the partner is bored for lack of an external occupation.

(b) Work

This means that the spouse's professional activities are indeed one of the crucial issues to be considered in planning any foreign assignment. Figures on this are quite clear: 80 % of the expatriates are married; 61 % of the spouses have a professional activity before leaving, but only 18 % of them continue to work abroad¹. The reason for this is simple: in almost every country an expatriate's spouse does not have the right to work. Yet nothing is more conducive to tensions among spouses than if one of the partners is bored.

¹ Andrew Payne "Expatriates go hand in hand with partner concerns", in Net Expat Newsletter, April 2002, p.2

The attendant legal constraints are particularly frustrating if one considers that women's professional ambitions and career opportunities have by now become a reality. Gone are the days when wives meekly followed their husbands! Married women are often not prepared to sacrifice their own careers for the sake of their husbands'. In fact, 15 % of the American expatriates are women; yet few husbands are willing to give up their own jobs to follow their wives!

Thus described, the issue may seem insoluble. Yet there are solutions – but they must be given serious thought before the expatriation, and before undertaking all the administrative steps – tedious as they may be -- that inevitably precede it. Some of the approaches suggested below may be of help:

2. Ten approaches

Solutions to the spouses' adjustment problems will of course vary depending on whether or not she/he accepts not to work, or whether, on the contrary, the spouse insists on maintaining a professional activity. In the former case, the problem will be to find something to fill the spouses' day-to-day life. For the working spouse, there are also possible solutions, even if they may be more difficult to implement. In either case, however, it is essential that the spouses discuss them before an international assignment is accepted.

(a) Advance planning

1. Preventing rather than healing

When one of the partners is offered an international job, he/she may be carried away by his enthusiasm, and think primarily of how such an opportunity would enrich his own career. Quite frequently, the future expatriate will be tempted to play down the expected difficulties, or to refrain from discussing them, and perhaps even to take the decision without consulting his or her partner. It is at that point -- i.e. before the signature of a contract and the actual move – that the difficulties start.

In order to make sure that his foreign assignment will be a success, the future expatriate will in fact have to thoroughly discuss the move with his/her spouse, explaining that in all probability she/he will not be able to have a professional activity in their new country of residence. The move will thus have to be based on a joint decision: if the spouse were not in agreement, the employee might well choose to turn down the assignment: it would in fact seem better to refuse and wait for a more propitious occasion, when the family might be prepared to move, than to force a decision which may jeopardize family harmony.

2. Intercultural training and salary negotiation

If, after mature reflection within the family, the proposed foreign assignment is accepted, some preparatory steps will help assure that the move be a success. In the event that intercultural or language training programs are available, for instance, both spouses should take advantage of them. This will strengthen family bonds, and enable them to jointly face any future culture shock.

At times the partner may not be prepared to leave her/his present employment, in order not to give up a second salary. If the expatriate's emoluments in the foreign posting are not sufficient to make up for this loss, he should see to it that his/her contract include adequate compensation to that effect.

(b) Non-professional activities

Before leaving on the foreign assignment, the employee and his spouse should thoroughly explore what extra-professional activities would not only be possible in their new place of residence, but might indeed make the expatriation appear as an opportunity rather than as a sacrifice.

(1) Training and volunteer work

Expatriate spouses may want to take advantage of the foreign assignment to pursue their studies or advanced training, thus improving their career opportunities upon repatriation. They may also devote themselves to humanitarian work, or learn new languages which would enrich their future professional CVs. The choice of these non-professional opportunities would of course be made easier if both spouses could make an exploratory trip to their future country of residence: this would allow the non-working spouse to establish contacts and find out about places and ongoing activities. Where necessary and appropriate, the future expatriate might, in his contract negotiations, request that the cost of such a prospecting visit be included among his emoluments.

(2) Children and social life

Spouses who have had to interrupt their own professional activities to follow their partners on a foreign posting may find that they have suddenly much more time to devote to their children and their education. To take full advantage of this, however, it will again be important to plan well in advance, perhaps contacting and seeking counsel from the spouses of other expatriates; checking in with their respective consulates may also be useful. And one should not forget Internet as a means to stay in touch with the home country and the rest of the world: e-mails, chats, sites, etc, as well as to keep abreast of activities and events in the new country of residence.

If these are some of the simple – but effective – approaches which may help a spouse to develop and find a meaning in life as an expatriate even without a regular job, the following suggestions are addressed to the spouses who have been able to continue a professional career.

(c) A professional activity: difficult, but not impossible

(1) A “commuter” contract

One solution would of course be for the spouse to keep his/her job present job in the home country, but to have her/his expatriate partner return from time to time for long week-ends or vacations. These arrangements are of course possible where the expatriate posting is not too far from home – e.g. within the European Union, where such “commuter” or “trans-frontier” contractual arrangements are quite common, but should be negotiated in advance with the employer.

(2) A short-time assignment

In other cases, where “commuter” arrangements are not possible because the foreign posting is too far away, the expatriation might take the form of a short-time assignment -- e.g. for a period of months – which would allow the non-expatriate partner to keep her/his job in the home country without endangering the cohesion of the family.

(3) A double expatriation

Where – as in most cases – neither “commuter” arrangements nor a short-time expatriation contract are feasible, the other spouse may in turn be able to be assigned by his/her employer to the same foreign posting. Such arrangements are of course not frequent, and must be negotiated in advance; they depend naturally on whether or not the employer is active and has a vacancy in that particular foreign country. Even then, the dates of the two expatriation assignments may not coincide, so that some temporary separation arrangements would have to be envisaged; ultimately, however, this would permit the spouses to pursue their respective professional careers in the same foreign country.

Another possibility would be for the remaining spouse to find a job with the expatriate’s employer in the same foreign country – even if under a simple local employment rather than an expatriate contract. While this would require the spouse to leave his/her present job in their home country, it would allow both to pursue their professional careers in the expatriate’s foreign posting.

(4) Finding a local job.

Last, the expatriate's spouse may decide to prospect in advance the job opportunities presented in the local employment market. It should be kept in mind, however, that finding a local job is generally far from easy: language problems, non-recognition of university or professional degrees, low salaries are only some of the difficulties that must be expected. If a job is nevertheless found, the future employer will normally help to obtain the necessary work permit. The spouse would thus enter the country as the employee of the local firm, rather than as the expatriate's wife or husband. In any event, it must be expected that these procedures may take quite some time, so that the family would be reunited only some months after the expatriate spouse's posting.

(5) Mounting one's own enterprise

For the most adventurous, there is of course also the possibility of mounting their own business or professional enterprise in the country to which the expatriate spouse has been assigned. Quite evidently, this calls for a thorough – and hard-nosed – prospecting of the local market, culture, and often also language. It involves major risks, and the formalities to obtain the requisite authorizations are generally quite time-consuming: indeed, it may not be easy to reconcile these administrative drudgeries with the need to care for one's children. This also means that – generally – the investment of time and money to create one's own enterprise, and see it bear fruit, makes sense only if the expatriate spouse intends to stay in the particular posting for a considerable number of years.

(6) A rare case: where the expatriate's spouse has the right to work.

The problems confronting the expatriates' spouses are increasingly being recognized: in many countries this has gradually led to significant legislative changes. Thus in the Netherlands, in Canada and in the United States, the spouses of expatriate workers are entitled to hold a job (in the US, this applies only to the spouses of expatriates holding an L or E visa).

One should of course keep in mind that the right to work does not guarantee that one will find a job. The job market in the particular foreign country may be saturated, diplomas may not be recognized, or the language may pose a problem.

In conclusion: difficult though it may be, the international adventure could be a very exciting and successful experience for the family as a whole, as long as the problems attending the expatriate's spouse are not overlooked. Moving your family to a new and unfamiliar setting is indeed more difficult than moving a pawn on a chessboard, the more so as the expatriate himself is not an electron that can move freely in any environment. Accepting an expatriate posting must thus be a joint decision, and every effort must be made to ensure that the spouse's life will also be enriched by it. This may not be easy, but will in any event be worth the effort.



Further reading:

"Femmes : l'autre moitié de l'expat". In *Français à l'étranger*. Summer 2001. Pages 38, 39 and 43.

Andrew Payne. "Expatriates go hand in hand with partner concerns". In *Net Expat Newsletter*. April 2002. Pages 1-2.

"News US legislation to allow expat spouses to work". In *Global Workforce*. March 2002. Page 1.

"Permits". In *Corporate Relocation News*. September 2001. Pages 16 and 25.

"Dual careers". In *Corporate Relocation News*. June 2001. Page 12.

Linda K. Stroh, Arup Varma et Stacey J. Vally Durbin. "Why women are encountering barriers to being sent abroad". In *Mobility*. October 1999. Pages 99-104.