

HRD: WHAT ABOUT THE EXPAT'S SPOUSE?

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All too often a foreign assignment fails because new environment the expatriate has moved is alien and hostile his family. The expatriate might thus be led to demand an early repatriation and – if this request was turned down – he could decide to quit his/her job. On the other hand, if the expatriate decided to hold on to his assignment despite the difficulties experienced by his family, this could cause serious tensions in his family, and these might, in turn, lead to separation or divorce: lower productivity, depression, sick leave and finally early repatriation could then follow.

Quite evidently, such an outcome can be costly for both employee and employer, not only in financial terms, but also in terms of wasted time and human efforts. There are not many alternatives to avoid such failures: to whatever efforts will be made to help the expatriate himself, specific measures should be addressed to the expatriate's spouse.

If the context of a “normal” job one tries to keep private and professional life as far apart a possible, where expatriate postings are involved, the HRD should make every effort to ensure the spouse's well-being, since – abroad more than in the home country -- a harmonious family life has a direct bearing on the employee's professional performance.

1. Spouse's work: the principal challenge.

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. 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!

While this may seem to pose insurmountable problems, solutions do exist – but they must be given serious thought before the expatriation, even though they may involve additional costs: as long as they are part of a coherent and global foreign posting policy, they will indeed prove an excellent investment

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

2. Ten approaches

The measures to ensure that the expatriates' spouses will adjust to the new setting depend of course upon whether or not she/he accepts not to work. In the first case, the problem will be to help the spouse to find a meaningful way of life in the foreign country. Where, on the contrary, the spouse wants to maintain a professional activity, it might also be possible to provide some help, even though this would not always be easy. In either case, however, it will be essential to face and discuss the issue before the employee accepts the foreign posting.

(a) Advance planning

1. Preventing rather than healing

In fact, the problem of the spouse's work must not only be discussed well in advance: it should also be taken into account in the selection of candidates for expatriate postings. The HRD would thus be well advised to raise the issue at the very outset, making it clear to the candidate that in all probability his/her spouse will not be able to work in the foreign country. The HRD should also make sure that the candidate has discussed the matter with his/her spouse before he accepts the foreign posting. It will indeed be better to lose a potential candidate than to be later confronted with a failure of the expatriation: even if this meant limiting the choice of candidates for a given job, it would improve the chances of success.

2. "Out-placement" firms

In some instances it may of course be possible to help the expatriate's spouse find a job in the particular foreign posting. Evidently, the chances of success depend to a large extent on her/his professional profile (scientists and computer technicians are generally best placed to find jobs). The HRD would be well advised to deal with the matter at the very outset; where the spouse has a good employment profile, the HRD may steer her/him to one of the so-called "out-placement" firms which could serve as a "coach" to explore the potential job market, and hopefully find work in the foreign country concerned.

3. Inter-cultural and language training also for the spouse.

Once the foreign posting has been accepted, the HRD would do well to include the spouse in the preparatory inter-cultural programs offered to the future expatriate. If this involves learning, or at least familiarizing oneself with the foreign language, it would be particularly desirable. This will prepare the spouse as well to face and find ways of overcoming any possible culture shock, thus helping to reduce tensions that might be generated within the couple.

4. An adequate salary

At times it is the fear of losing a second salary that makes the expatriate's spouse refuse to leave her/his job in the home country. In such cases, the expatriate's contract could include a compensatory payment, or provide sufficient emoluments to allow the couple to maintain its present level and style of life.

(b) Facilitating non-professional activities

(1) Training and volunteer work

The HRD should explore with the future expatriate and his/her spouse what extra-professional activities would be possible in their new place of residence, so as to make the expatriation appear as an opportunity rather than a sacrifice for the spouse as well. Expatriate spouses may thus 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 the employer gave both spouses an opportunity to make an exploratory trip to their future country of residence, allowing the non-working spouse to establish contacts and find out about places and ongoing activities.

(2) Children and social life

The HRD could help the spouse having a more meaningful social life by facilitating her/his contact with the spouses of other expatriates, as well as with the consulate of the future country of residence. Internet would in particular be of major help, by e-mails, chats, sites, etc, to keep abreast of activities in the home country, 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 only 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 by now quite common. If compatible with the future international assignment, they might be suggested to the future expatriate.

(2) A short-time assignment

Neither “commuter” arrangements nor a short-time expatriation contract would of course be feasible where the foreign posting and the home country are too far from each other. In such cases the expatriation might – if the nature of the job allowed it – take the form of a short-time assignment -- e.g. for a period of months, allowing the expatriate’s partner to keep her/his job in the home country without thereby endangering the cohesion of the family.

(3) A double expatriation

In the usual case (foreign assignment for a substantial period of time, and/or at a greater distance from the home country), it will be more difficult to find a solution, but some satisfactory arrangements may nevertheless be possible on a case-by-case basis: the spouse may thus, in some instances, be assigned by her/his employer to the same foreign posting as the expatriate, depending of course on whether or not the spouse’s employer was active and had an opening there. Even then, however, the dates of the two expatriation assignments may not coincide, so that some temporary separation arrangements would have to be envisaged. On the other hand, such double expatriation arrangement may be advantageous for both employers – e.g. by sharing the expatriation costs.

Another possibility would be for the spouse to find a job with the expatriate’s employer in the same foreign country, assuming that there was a vacancy, and that the spouse’s qualifications corresponded to the job. In such instances, the spouse might be given a simple local employment rather than an expatriate contract.

(4) 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 those cases, the expatriate’s employer may help by putting the spouse in touch with a specialized employment agency or – ideally – to propose the services of an “out-placement” agency before the departure for the foreign posting.

In any event, the chances of finding a job depend upon the spouse's professional skills. In France, for instance, it should be relatively easy for a highly qualified scientist to find a satisfactory job.

In conclusion: difficult though it may be, the spouse's situation cannot not be ignored if your firm wants to create the best chances of success to its expatriate staff, and thus benefit fully from its investment in them. Moving an employee's family to a new and unfamiliar setting is indeed more difficult than moving a pawn on a chessboard: the expatriate himself is not an electron that can move freely in any environment. Making sure that he enjoys a harmonious en serene family life will be fully rewarded in his professional performance.

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.