

Low cost - high yield: A little innovation goes a long way

"Oh no! Don't start about spouses issues, again. We know!" complains a Corporate HR manager from a Dutch company in Hilversum.

"Yes, we know that you know, but what are you doing about it?" asks intercultural trainer and consultant Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich.

In the past few weeks I have seen three expatriate families fall into deep trouble - acute stress and depression with marriages under duress...not to mention the professional consequences. The people involved were regular employees on assignment who were not being sent to "hardship" locations, unless you want to define Brussels, Prague or Frankfurt as such.

What HR can do

Take the lid off

Do not make spouse problems a problem, remove the taboo image. It all starts with that important first gesture to show you care. Why not just call them, write a card, or simply invite them for coffee.

Pre departure and post arrival

Most companies already include spouses in the pre-departure intercultural trainings (unless you belong to the 40 percent of corporations that still miss out on this crucial involvement...). But we all know that the real fun starts after arrival: Offer a local follow up and see whether your provider facilitates 'Spouse's Workshops'.

"We don't have a budget"

How about self-help? Reserve a meeting room every 14 days at your facilities and, for the cost of the company's canteen-catering allow the spouses to meet, share information and exchange experiences.

"We don't have that many expat spouses"

Nor do many others: Therefore, rather than each individual corporation struggling to define the right solution or setting up their own network; time, effort and money can be saved by considering a new initiative - a shared network.

A shared network

This simple yet brilliant idea was initiated by the coordinators of Heineken Partner Network, who opened up their "closed shop" and welcomed other multinationals to join their renamed informal network.

Says expat spouse Jacqueline van Haaften, Chairperson of Heineken's Partner Network, "When you go to a new country you really want to learn from the experiences of those who have gone before you and to get advice from people of different nationalities with different view points. Questions often raised include; 'What is it like to work in this country?', 'what is it like to give birth in this country?', 'Which schools would you recommend?'"

Van Haaften continues, "What I missed most when I was abroad was a database through which you could find work or have an idea of the kinds of vacancies that were available."

Global Connection is a new Internet-based platform which sets out to bundle the experiences and resources gathered by spouses on as many different locations as there are letters in the alphabet.

A database-driven website, Global Connection provides:

- inside information on the new posting
- a first point of contact for the members once on location (Spouses and partners will eventually be able to put their Curriculum Vitae's on the network.)
- Electronic newsletters will keep the community informed and updated between the quarterly magazine.
- Further services such as workshops will be available in due course to help families to understand and deal with the new cultures they will find themselves living in.

This service is driven by the spouses for the spouses with as little overheads as possible to keep the yearly membership fee to a minimum.

For more information on this initiative visit www.global-connection.info

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