

The pressures of a foreign assignment

If you have just been through a move to a foreign country you can understand the stress and sense of upheaval caused by an overseas assignment. Andrew McCathie looks at some of the problems shifting around the world causes to spouses and partners.

In any foreign posting, it's often the spouse or partner who bears the brunt of the shift.

They are the ones who have to oversee and take charge of the details of the move. In many cases, they are the ones who have to arrange the moving company, decide what to take, organise for the house or apartment to be rented out, find out about schools, explain it all to the kids, cancel all the utilities, line things up with the bank and possibly even work out what to do with the dog or cat.



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It's often the same at the other end where a large part of organising the process of settling in seems to fall on the shoulders of the spouse or partner. This can even come down to working out the local currency.

And then when everything seems to be working OK, it's then up to the trailing spouse or partner to find a little space for themselves and for their interests as well as venturing out into the world to make more social contact. This can mean even trying to plot a course to finding a job.

According to research compiled by Fawco and Cigna International Expatriate Benefits, about 70 percent of expatriates are accompanied by a spouse with only 11 percent of spouses saying that companies provided support for spouses.

"The number one cited cause for early termination of a foreign posting is the family's inability to adjust to the local culture," says Expatica columnist Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich who next month is holding a special workshop for spouses in the German financial capital, Frankfurt.

"Although well researched and publicised (cultural problems) has remained the most disregarded factor," says van Swol-Ulbrich. "In my ongoing surveys, spouses shared their views, voiced experiences and expressed their needs."

It also means, van Swol-Ulbrich said, that the lack of support for spouses and partners during foreign assignments is a crucial issue.

"More should be done by way of explanation of what to expect on an assignment," said one British spouse living in Germany.

On arrival and during the setting up stage, networking appears to take on considerable importance for spouses and partners as it provides a key source of support and information.

"Contact with other expats proved to be a most valuable source of information," said an Australian spouse.

Exactly who is a spouse or partner and for that matter, what constitutes a family unit, has changed dramatically in recent years with far wider acceptance of gay relationships by both governments and companies along with the growing number of cases where it is the woman in the relationship that lands the foreign posting and the male follows her.

This also appears to have led to a change in the educational background of many spouses or partners and their hopes for a job during their days as an expat.

The need for language skills can only complicate the whole process of settling in, finding cultural bearings and maybe even landing a job.

In addition, it has possibly helped to contribute to the frustrations and pressures that sometimes emerge during foreign postings, especially as work restrictions for foreigners in many nations have increased in recent years.

Indeed, the Fawco and Cigna research shows that 78 percent of spouses and partners hold higher educational qualifications with 72 percent of them having worked prior to the overseas assignment.

Moreover, the research showed that 64 percent of spouses and partners are aged between 30 and 49.

But despite the changes that have taken place in who is now a spouse or partner, the statistics also show that the overwhelming majority are women.

To be sure, some 85 percent of spouses are women with those on foreign postings having children aged between 5 and 12. This does raise very common problems for a large number of expat families.

“Stress is often a steady companion, as living in another culture, facing the challenge of a foreign language and struggling with dual career issues leaves us without our networks and successful coping skills,” says van Swol-Ulbrich.

“Juggling these different roles and learning to cope with a new cultural environment requires specific knowledge and coping skills.”

Van Swol-Ulbrich said that her workshop, set down for 15 October, will focus on gaining a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges connected in raising a family overseas, how international mobility impacts on family members, and how cultural differences permeate our everyday life.

This will include examining how culture has an influence on our daily life as well as recognising the signals of culture shock and facing up to the problems encountered by children in making the move around the world.

“Naturally the sharing of resources and coping strategies will round off this interactive workshop which encourages the participants to network and share their experiences,” she says.

For further information about the workshop and the special discount for Expatica readers you can contact Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich at Consultus Seminars [Email: seminars@consultus.net] Her website is WWW.Consultus.net.

September 2003