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Changing the way governments do business with expat spouses

It's no secret that dual career issues are regarded as a key reason why employees turn down international assignments. But one organisation is working to make it easier for an assignee's spouse to be granted open work permission. Jennifer Hamm reports.



The partner's struggle to pursue a career can bring the whole assignment down

The Permits Foundation, a not-for-profit based in The Hague, has set out to educate and lobby governments about the advantages of granting open work permits for the partners of expatriates.

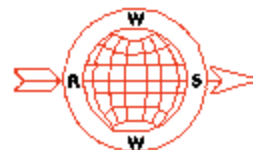
"That's what we want to happen all around the world," said Kathleen van der Wilk-Carlton, who helped found the organisation in 2001 and oversees its operations.

"This is a worldwide issue. We're talking about a process of promoting change."

The idea to affect some change at the policy level developed while Van der Wilk-Carlton's was managing Royal Dutch/Shell's international Spouse Employment Centre. Although many partners wanted to find jobs in the host country, it often proved to be difficult because the prospective employer would have to incur the cost of securing a work permit.

"That's when the light went on, we have to change the way countries look at this," said Van der Wilk-Carlton.

Making it easier for the so-called trailing spouse to land a job in the host country had become more than a 'nice to have.' Candidate for expatriation can often be reluctant to accept an assignment because of the potential negative impact it will have on their spouse's career as well as the loss of income for the family, said Siobhan Cummins, managing director in Europe for consultancy ORC Worldwide.



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And from the research Cummins has done, "the problem is getting worse and not better."

Philippe Cabanettes, vice president of Human Resources for Axalto, agreed. "I don't know anybody who has said, 'I don't have this problem.'" Cabanettes also runs the non-profit Partnerjob.com, an online employment resource for expatriate spouses.

While Partnerjob.com is working to connect job seekers with job opportunities, Permits Foundation set out to reform immigration laws on a global scale. Van der Wilk-Carlton approached several companies with her idea and they agreed addressing dual careers was an issue. With six companies signing on initially as sponsors,

Permits Foundation was established as a non-profit and began an education campaign. Today, the organisation has more than 30 corporate sponsors and the United Nations has signed on as an observer.

The business and legislative case to grant open work permits to expatriate spouses is strong.

The majority of trailing spouses are women, many of whom have careers. Some 50 percent of all women – up to 80 percent of women under the age of 35 – work in their home country. When they join their husbands abroad, women often struggle to land jobs.

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The single largest factor that hinders job placement is work-permit restrictions, according a 3-year study carried out by academic Yvonne McNulty, entitled "The Trailing Spouse: Barrier to Mobility or International Asset?"

Along with stagnating career development, turbulence in the marriage can also occur. Some 60 percent of trailing spouses said the ability to work was related to marital stress, according to McNulty's study. And 49 percent of respondents said lack of economic independence also contributed to marital strain.

Women now make up 50 percent of all corporate managers, meaning that the number of male trailing spouses is also on the rise, said Cummins.

As households increasingly on dual incomes, nations are also facing several economic development issues. The global marketplace has meant cut-throat competition for foreign direct investment.

Permits Foundation contends that a nation can make itself more attractive to foreign investors by granting open work permission for spouses of assignees. Board members from Unilever, Siemens and Shell have signed on as patrons to the non-profit, an indication that the issue is high on the corporate agenda.

Nations are also on the verge of a looming talent crisis, with Baby Boomers set to begin retiring in 2008. At the same time, universities are not producing sufficient graduates to meet market demand, according to a recent report from Deloitte Research.

Those countries which allow open work permits to expatriate spouses stand to gain from an often untapped talent pool. Permits Foundation points to the United Kingdom, where anyone who has the right to stay has the right to work, for best practice.

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The organisation's efforts to lobby governments appear to be working.

"In the countries where we've raised [the issue], governments have been open to discussion and change," said Van der Wilk-Carlton. "There is a strong feeling that it is an issue whose time has come."

When Permits Foundation first launched, it joined a lobbying campaign already in motion in the United States. In January 2002, the government agreed to grant spouses of those on inter-company transfers the right to work.

In the meantime, the French government had launched a campaign in to improve the foreign investment climate, asking top CEOs to give suggestions on reforms that would make the nation more attractive. One of the reforms to emerge in 2004 was that spouses of assignees earning 50,000 EUR annually and who themselves earn more than 2,000 EUR a month can obtain a work permit.

And in the Netherlands, work and residency visa red tape was eased last fall with the introduction of the Knowledge Migrants – or highly-skilled, well-paid newcomers – classification. Permits Foundation raised the issue regarding the spouses of Knowledge Migrants.

Then, on 25 February, the Dutch Cabinet decided to exempt trailing spouses of skilled expatriates from applying for a work permit before being allowed to take up employment in the Netherlands. The proposal — lodged by Social Affairs State Secretary Henk van Hoof — also states that the exemption will lapse if the relationship ends within three years.

"We want to build on these successes and then approach the countries that are seen as trend setters," said Van der Wilk-Carlton.

The foundation is looking to points further a field, approaching countries that their sponsors cite as important as well as nations that are interested in increasing foreign investment. This year it has plans to develop networks in Asia.

Related Articles

- [Dual careers or duelling careers?](#)
- [Spouse networking](#)
- [Expat spouses exempted from work permit](#)

"It really is something that supports international mobility, diversity and equal opportunity," said Van der Wilk-Carlton.

Useful links:

Permits Foundation www.permitsfoundation.com

Partner Job www.partnerjob.com

Trailing Spouse www.thetrailingspouse.com

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Subject: Expat support and dual careers



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