

Trailing spouse's job needs start to get more company time

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VIENNA Ruth Whitby loves her husband, Ben - and she also loves her job. When he was transferred to Japan, Whitby, a British medical doctor, struggled for a year to get a license to practice in Japan. She eventually succeeded and built a thriving medical practice in Tokyo, only to see her diplomat husband transferred again. This time all attempts at practicing medicine in their new home of Vienna failed.

Dr. Whitby, 39, now leaves her two small children, Joe, 8, and Isobel, 6, every third week to practice at a clinic in London.

Thirty years ago, a diplomat's wife like Whitby might have busied herself planning luncheons and ironing her husband's shirts. Times have changed. Almost half of spouses of overseas employees have their own jobs and their unwillingness to give these up is an increasing impediment to mobility, according to corporate surveys. In a time of cost cuts and economic downturns, overseas employers are loath to spend money finding a job for an accompanying spouse. However, companies are coming to accept the fact that they need to offer some kind of career support if they want to tempt couples overseas or prevent them from prematurely calling it quits.

"My husband would love to stay, but he can't stand to see me so unhappy," Whitby explained. The couple will not be extending their contract.

The issue of dual career partners is quietly becoming a crisis in multinational human resources circles, but still one that many employers would rather not address.

According to the 1999 Global Relocation Trends Survey conducted by Windham International GMAC and the National Foreign Trade Council, almost half of all spouses accompanying expatriates had jobs before moving abroad. Of that number, only 11 percent were employed during the assignment. The same survey lists partner dissatisfaction as the most common reason for an assignment to fail, although the exact cause of that dissatisfaction is not spelled out.

A 1999/2000 survey by the accountants PricewaterhouseCoopers of 270 European employers found that almost two thirds listed the spouse or partner's career as a barrier to mobility. The authors of the study also noted that "factors rated least highly by companies when selecting people for assignments such as partner adaptability and dual career management are the most likely to be the cause of failed assignments."

"We are seeing this problem more and more," said Pam Braun, a spokeswoman for Royal Dutch Shell Group. "The dual career issue is hot. Now every partner, and more and more are men, wants to have a career."

Despite these findings, and numerous other surveys showing the same trends, companies are slow to address this issue. Only 19 percent of companies participating in the Windham survey helped spouses to find jobs, 20 percent helped with career planning, and 11 percent paid a job-finding fee. A third offered no assistance at all.

"A lot of human resources managers know this dual career issue exists," said the Britain-based lecturer and career counselor Joanna Parfitt. "But they still have their heads in the sand."

Of course, not all expatriate spouses want to work. Many see an assignment abroad as an opportunity to put work aside for a while and devote themselves to children or travel. But if the assignment stretches on, or becomes multiple assignments, most highly educated and trained spouses start thinking of gainful employment again.

"When the child goes to kindergarten, then what do you do?" said Scoti Kaesshaefer, who gave up a career as a director of communications at a biotech firm in the United States to follow her husband to Vienna. "These are college-educated, successful people; they don't want to answer the phones."

Once abroad, accompanying spouses may find their options frustratingly limited. Breaking into the local job market can be near to impossible without suitable guidance, international career counselors say. Networking, the most important factor in most job searches, can take years in a foreign environment.

However, for most spouses the greatest hurdle is a legal one. Only a handful of countries grant work permits to accompanying spouses. Exceptions include Australia and EU member states for EU citizens only.

The common wisdom is that spouses should be flexible, reinventing themselves to fit the job market at hand, working out of home or doing volunteer work. But the more ambitious and educated the spouse is, the less satisfying these solutions are likely to be.

"Volunteer work is not meaningful to me," admitted Yvonne McNulty, 35, an Australian who is working toward a doctorate in international management as an external student at Monash University in Melbourne. "I've worked hard all my life and I like to get paid for it."

McNulty has spent four years trying to obtain a work permit in the United States. She said she had received no help from her husband's employer, the computer software company Oracle.

These days, however, most overseas employers offer at least some kind of career support services, such as spouse networks, résumé writing workshops or career counseling. Some companies have even set up job centers and hooked into online job boards like Partnerjob.com, a subscription service that posts job openings at other multinational companies. Employers may also avail themselves of a small number of specialized international career agencies that track down jobs specifically for accompanying spouses. One such company, NetExpat, based in Brussels, charges companies \$2,500 to \$7,000 to find work for the partners of overseas employees usually within 17 weeks of registering, according to Alain Verstandig, its founder and managing director. The company claims a success rate of 82 percent, Verstandig says.

An increasing number of employers are giving spouses a one-time payment, usually several thousand dollars, intended to offset the costs of re-education or language training. While the payments are usually welcome, Verstandig said, this "quick fix" as he calls it, falls far short of actually helping partners to get a job. For that, he says, the job seeker needs guidance on the host country's job market and culture and contacts in the field.

Braun, the spokeswoman from Royal Dutch Shell Group, agrees. "The most common approach is to throw money at these spouses to keep them quiet," she said. "We don't think this is the right approach."

Shell's Spouse Employment Center, opened in 1995, provides information on job markets in 50 Shell expatriate destinations as well as a counseling team at headquarters in The Hague. The center also offers workshops on résumé writing and interviewing techniques. Last year it had more than 500 users, Braun said, although rates of success are hard to come by.

Shell is also trying to tackle the work permit problem with an initiative called the

Permits Foundation, a group of employers and labor organizations that lobbies foreign governments to relax work permit regulations for accompanying spouses. So far, the group has managed to convince the American government to grant work permits to the spouses of employees with an L1 visa. This visa is available only to managers and executives of multinational firms who are intracompany transferees, i.e., transferred from one company posting abroad to another in the United States.

Career counselors stress that the best time to look for work abroad is before leaving home. Even if a spouse does not want to work at first, it is best to plan for that eventuality, they say, by researching the job market at the destination country, including any legal requirements. In some cases, the employee will need a certain kind of visa that allows the spouse to work.

Similarly, the best time to negotiate terms of career support with the spouse's employer is before signing the contract. Spouses should always try to get guarantees of a work permit written into their partner's contract, Verstandig said.

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