

FEATURE STORY - January, 2006

Lost in the Shuffle

Recognizing the strain that being unable to work places on trailing spouses of expatriates, organizations seek to remedy the situation.

BY JULIE COOK RAMIREZ

When Australian native Yvonne McNulty gave up her position at PricewaterhouseCoopers in Sydney to accompany her husband, Stephen, on assignment to the United States for his employer, Oracle Corp., she had her reservations. After all, she enjoyed her job as executive assistant to the managing partner in global risk management and was understandably concerned about what the move would mean for her long-term career opportunities.

After discussing the matter, however, the McNultys determined that accepting the assignment would ultimately be in the best interests of their family. Besides, it promised to be an adventure, something Yvonne, a former noncommissioned officer of the Royal Australian Navy, looked forward to. So it was that in February of 2000, they packed their bags and flew to Chicago.

Instantly, McNulty found herself in a totally different world—that of the "trailing spouse," a term she had never even heard before, much less imagined herself being branded. Like so many other trailing spouses, she found herself unable to work in the host location due to stringent work-permit regulations. At first, that didn't bother her. On the contrary, she enjoyed the opportunity to be a free spirit, taking in the sights, sounds and tastes of expat life without the hindrance of a job. "I just thought it was fantastic," she says. "Even if I wanted to work, I had this brilliant excuse that I couldn't."

After a "honeymoon period" of about six months, however, reality set in. McNulty found herself 9,000 miles from home without a job and with nothing very meaningful to fill her time. As a result, her marriage began to falter. Much to her dismay, she began resenting her husband—not only for talking her into making the move, but also for the career success he was enjoying while she struggled with an identity crisis caused by the loss of hers.

By November, McNulty says, she "hit rock-bottom and really floundered." She tried volunteering for five different local organizations, but found it really wasn't for her. Numerous times during that first



COVER STORY

- [The Latino Factor](#)
-[SIDEBAR: Breaking Through the Knowledge Gap](#)

FEATURES

- [Lost in the Shuffle](#)
-[SIDEBAR: Obtaining Work Permits for Expat Spouses](#)
-[SIDEBAR: Survey Cites Problem, Need for Solution](#)
- [Preparing for a Plague](#)
-[SIDEBAR: Things You Should Know About Pandemic Influenza](#)

HEADLINES

- [Senate Approves Pension Funding Reform Calling for Premium Hike](#)
- [Court: Nonsexual Abusive Behavior May Be Sexual Harassment](#)
- [Nation, Employers Brace For Avian Flu Pandemic](#)

year, she approached her husband about returning to Australia, where she would be able to work once again. He was adamant, however, that going home wasn't the solution, and he implored her to give it more time. It wasn't until McNulty decided to enroll in graduate school that she began feeling comfortable in her own skin—and in her role as an expat spouse.

Ultimately, McNulty ended up earning a master's degree in international human resource management from Southern Cross University in Lismore, Australia. Now based in Singapore on yet another of her husband's assignments, she has established herself as a consultant, researcher, writer and lecturer, specializing in spousal issues, along with expat return-on-investment. In 2001, she founded thetrailingspouse.com, a Web site designed to disseminate her writings on the subject, as well as the results of The Trailing Spouse Survey, a four-year study she began while working toward her master's.

McNulty's experience—including being denied authorization to seek gainful employment and wanting to return home early—is far from unusual. According to her own survey, which tallied up the responses of 264 trailing spouses originating from 28 home countries and currently living in 54 host countries, 79 percent of participants had a career prior to their husband's or wife's assignment. However, 64 percent said their careers did not continue when they relocated. When asked why that was the case, 55 percent cited "visa/work-permit restrictions." No other response even came close, the nearest being "stayed home to raise children," which was cited by a mere 12 percent of respondents.

Among international HR professionals, this comes as no surprise. They have long been aware that just a handful of countries—including Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and the United Kingdom—have traditionally granted spouses the freedom to work while on assignment with their husbands or wives. Granted, 30 years ago, this posed few problems, as expat spouses were usually females content to stay at home, raising children and pursuing hobbies while in foreign lands. In recent years, however, the rise of the dual-career couple has heightened awareness of the issue. Not only has it become fairly common to find both spouses employed, but it's also likely they're both high-potential high-earners hesitant to put careers on back burner, even for the sake of their beloved spouses.

Breaking Barriers

Bound by the laws of the countries in which they operate, employers have had little choice but to help spouses find something else to do in lieu of working. Many organizations have identified volunteer opportunities for spouses in the host locations or established spousal networks to serve as support groups. Left with few devices to actually help them find jobs, some companies have provided financial assistance so the spouse could take part in continuing education classes. Others have taken to issuing stipends, typically amounting to approximately \$5,000 per year, according to Siobhan Cummins, general manager of the London office of ORC Worldwide, managing director of ORC's International Compensation Services and Practice in Europe, and associate director of the Centre for Research into the Management of Expatriation in London.

While such a paltry sum doesn't even come close to replacing the income the spouse would have earned had he or she been gainfully employed, the fact that companies are at least trying to address the spousal employment dilemma is a step in the right direction, says Cummins.

"It's a recognition that spouses want to work, they want to continue their careers and they don't want to stay at home doing flower arranging—they want to actually do something with the qualifications and the experience they've gained," she says.

As in McNulty's case, there is frequently a desire to end the assignment early and return to an environment in which the spouse is able to work. While McNulty and her husband chose to stick it out, that's not always what happens. In extreme cases, expats may choose to repatriate early.

Other times, a potential expat may refuse an assignment due to a spouse's inability to obtain employment. According to a 2004 Landwell/PricewaterhouseCoopers survey, 59 percent of participants cite the dual-career issue as one of the main reasons for assignment refusal. "Anybody who tells you that the dual-career issue is not the key point in a transfer is either a liar or somebody who doesn't know what's going on in his or her own company," says Philippe Cabanettes, vice president of human resources for Axalto, a Paris-based manufacturer of microprocessor ("smart") cards and point-of-sale terminals. "For many years, we've been faced with people who say, 'I can't go there because my spouse will not give up [his or her] job to follow me.' "

Cabanettes speaks from both professional experience—with Axalto's 150 expats—and personal experience. In 1993, he was transferred to the United States, only to find that his wife, a teacher, would not be granted authorization to work.

Seeking to address the dual-career issue, Axalto partnered with several other multinationals—Hewlett-Packard; Rhodia, a Paris-based specialty chemicals company; Group Danon, a Paris-based food and beverage manufacturer; New York-based Thales Fund Management; Schlumberger, a Paris-based oilfield services provider; Air Liquide Group, a Paris-based supplier of industrial and medical gases and related services; Ondeo, a subsidiary of Paris-based private water services company, Suez; and Paris-based Areva Gropu, one of the world's largest builders of nuclear reactors—to found partnerjob.com in 2001. Cabanettes is currently president of the not-for-profit association, which now boasts a 45-company membership. It serves as an online employment resource that seeks to line up its members' expat spouses and/or partners with job opportunities posted by other member companies. They are encouraged to apply for any of the jobs listed on the partnerjob.com Web site or to post their own resume/curriculum vitae. While the initiative has resulted in numerous expat spouses and partners finding jobs, there still remains the problem of work-permit restrictions, which prohibit them from obtaining employment in most countries around the world.

"They can try to match the spouse against the job openings, but that's no use if they can't legally work in the country," says Gill Gordon, director of executive compensation for Schlumberger Limited in London and Cabanettes' predecessor as president of partnerjob.com. "You come back to the work-permit issue as being so important to making the whole thing work."

The fact that the work-permit issue is the single biggest barrier to expat spousal employment was painfully clear to Kathleen van der Wilk-Carlton, who founded and ran Shell's International Spouse Employment Centre in The Hague, The Netherlands, for several years. She discussed the issue with ORC's Cummins following a joint presentation at the first annual "Business Women on the Move" conference, hosted by IBM and everywoman.co.uk, an online forum for female entrepreneurs, in London in the spring of 2001. That conversation convinced van der Wilk-Carlton something had to be done to convince governments that it would be in their best interests to grant open work permits to the spouses of expatriates.

Over the next several months, she took the concept to her counterparts at other organizations, all of whom responded enthusiastically. Soon, van der Wilk-Carlton found herself heading up The Permits Foundation, a not-for-profit organization launched in June 2001 dedicated to lobbying governments to relax their work-permit restrictions when it comes to expat spouses. Permits boasts more than 30 major international companies among its sponsors, including Unilever, Siemens, AstraZeneca, Shell, BMW, GlaxoSmithKline, Heineken and Schlumberger.

Striking Successes

During its first few months in existence, Permits was invited to add its voice to a lobbying effort that was already under way to address spousal work-permit challenges in the United States. The Washington-based American Council on International Personnel long had the issue of dual-career

couples on its radar screen when it created a coalition specifically designed to address the matter—Multinational Employers for Working Spouses—in 1998. Initially, MEWS sought to obtain work authorization for spouses of U.S.-bound expats on a reciprocal basis. That is, spouses coming into the United States from countries that allowed spouses of U.S.-based expats to obtain work permits while living there would, in turn, be given authorization to work in the United States.

Speaking at a meeting with several members of Congress, van der Wilk-Carlton told the group that those countries which already granted spouses permission to work—Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Venezuela and the United Kingdom—did not do so on a reciprocal basis. Rather, they simply allowed spouses of all nationalities to work. When the bill was redrafted for presentation under the Bush administration, the concept of reciprocity was gone. Consequently, the president signed into law on Jan. 16, 2002, two bills allowing accompanying spouses of L and E visa holders to obtain work authorization. (L visas are available for intra-company transfers, while E visas are available to foreign nationals seeking to engage in international commerce—for example, running a shop that sells products imported from their home country.)

Morale is better now because spouses hear they can get a job versus hearing, "You can't get one at all," says Lynn Shotwell, executive director of ACIP and co-chair of MEWS. "It's certainly impacted the ability of companies to ... move their first choice of person."

Bolstered by the early success, Permits quickly shifted its efforts to France, where the government had launched a campaign to improve the country's foreign-investment climate. Seeing an opportunity, van der Wilk-Carlton encouraged Schlumberger, which has a large presence in France, to spearhead the effort there. Working in conjunction with a small group of Permits sponsors, along with l'Agence Francaise des Investisseurs Internationaux (the French Agency for International Investment), Schlumberger made the case that an important part of attracting large companies was to allow their employees to bring working spouses with them who could also work in France. Due to high unemployment rates, the French government didn't opt for as open a model as Permits had hoped, but it did implement change in 2004. Specifically, spouses of assignees earning 50,000 EUR annually, who themselves earn more than 2,000 EUR a month, are now able to obtain a work permit. "It has significantly improved the situation," says Schlumberger's Gordon, who also sits on Permits' board of directors.

Following its success in France, Permits then focused on The Netherlands, which had also expressed interest in becoming a destination for trade and investment. In this instance, Shell and Unilever took the lead due to their significant presence in The Netherlands. Working together with other Permits sponsors, they petitioned the Secretary of State for Employment and the Minister of Employment, in addition to Parliamentary committees charged with examining immigration issues.

As a result, the Dutch government granted completely open work approval to the spouses and partners of so-called "knowledge migrants"—highly-skilled inbound workers earning more than 45,000 EUR per year. Under new regulations, passed in early 2005, partners of "knowledge migrants" from outside the European Union no longer need apply for a work permit. Instead, they are allowed to work freely throughout the duration of the assignment. To qualify, companies must apply to the Immigration and Naturalisation Service for "knowledge migrant" status for their expat employees. Information on applying for this status is available online at www.ind.nl/en/inbedrijf/wonenenwerken/standvanzakenkennismigranten.asp.

The positive reactions of the American, French and Dutch governments are typical, according to Jan Schaapsmeeders, human resource director of Shell Nederland, in The Hague, and chairman of the board of Permits. "In general, once we start talking with a government and we start explaining what we're after, they see the light," he says.

With three major successes in its back pocket, Permits looks to approach other countries its sponsors cite as critical to future growth, in addition to those nations that have expressed interest in increasing foreign investment. Van der Wilk-Carlton is encouraged by a recent announcement

by the European Commission that it intends to launch initiatives aimed at addressing the issue of employment for spouses of mobile workers. "Permits is proving to be quite an irresistible force," says Caroline Waters, director of people and policy for the BT Group (formerly British Telecom), a founding sponsor of Permits in London. "The fact that you have the voice of industry from so many different sectors operating in a large number of countries means you can really raise awareness and promote change."

Send questions or comments about this story to hreletters@lrp.com.

Side Bar  [Obtaining Work Permits for Expat Spouses](#)

Side Bar  [Survey Cites Problem, Need for Solution](#)

Go to Feature Story  [Preparing for a Plague](#)


Back to top

[Table of Contents](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Website Guide](#) | [Advertising](#) | [Contacts](#) | [Editorial Staff](#) | [Editorial Calendar](#)

[Home](#) | [Press Release Archives](#) | [Getting In Print](#) | [LRP Conferences](#)

POWERED BY



Entire Contents Copyright © 2006 Human Resource Executive®. All rights reserved.
[Privacy Statement](#)