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Back to university while living abroad

Higher education programmes for expats and trailing spouses can sharpen skills, improve self-esteem and help ensure an assignment's success. **Caroline Mitchell** reports.

When expat assignments fail, the impact to the organisation can be significant: financial loss, failure to meet business, and strategic objectives and damage to reputation. Because of these risks and the rising costs of overseas assignments, HR professionals are under increasing pressure to implement progressive policies and programmes for their expatriate staff.



Implementing a fair and flexible training and development policy that includes provisions for both the expat and their accompanying spouses is one way to contribute to the success of an assignment.

Expats reap numerous benefits when given the opportunity to continue their university education while on assignment.

Whether pursuing a masters, MBA or executive MBA programme, expats gain a global business perspective; develop their management skills, and are exposed to new markets, cultures, and customs while studying abroad. Earning higher qualifications not only improves their individual marketability but also increases their earning potential.

For accompanying spouses who are not able to work while abroad, the opportunity to continue with their university education is invaluable. Continuing studies is one way for spouses to maintain their professional identity and take advantage of networking opportunities while abroad.

The 2002 Global Relocation Trends Survey reports that before moving abroad, 50 percent of accompanying spouses were employed. During the assignment, the number dropped to 14 percent.

Spouses who are given the opportunity to bridge their professional experience with university studies may well be able to adjust more easily to their life abroad.

Gerry Heiligers, managing director of BISIS Consultancy in



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the Netherlands, agrees.

"It is very important for career-oriented accompanying spouses to be able to show what they have been doing while living in another country if they are not able to work," says Heiligers.

Upon return to their home countries, they return to their former career with an enhanced skill set and a sense of personal achievement.

Yvonne McNulty, founder of TheTrailingSpouse.com and an accompanying spouse from Australia, decided to earn a masters degree and is now working on her PhD. Taking advantage of the opportunity to study, she says, has further developed her "discipline, drive, lateral thinking, self-reliance, communication skills, self-esteem and self-identity."

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There are many short- and long-term benefits for a company willing to offer continuing education to the expat and their spouse while on assignment.

Many high-potential employees are sent on MBA or executive MBA programmes in order to expedite their movement to senior/executive management positions within their organisations.

Companies highly value the latest business tools, skills and insights these employees are exposed to during their studies. The knowledge gained through university studies are immediately applied to the job – the impact and return on investment for the company is immediate.

It is well understood that the accompanying spouse is the key

The European education market: an overview

Online programme, part-time. The Open University offers a variety of courses, most of which students can study singly or combine with others to obtain a qualification. Students can choose the order, timing and type of courses they want, and can study online from anywhere in the world.

Part-time executive MBA. The Euro MBA is an excellent option for those who want to combine working abroad with a part-time executive MBA. It offers e-learning courses in combination with six residential weeks throughout Europe.

Various MBA and masters programmes. The Rotterdam School of Business (Erasmus University) offers a diverse portfolio of postgraduate and post-experience programmes including the full-time MBA, part-time weekend executive MBA, masters programmes and a variety of open and customised executive education programmes. Although all of their programmes require class attendance, some are offered on a part-time basis on the weekend or in a modular format that enables working professionals to combine work with their studies.

On campus, full and part-time. For those looking to continue their business studies at one of the world's top-tier business schools, Insead in France is one of several to choose from. It offers a full-time MBA, a part-time executive MBA with onsite modules as well as PhD and customised executive education programmes. With full-fledged campuses in Asia and Europe, it is best suited for those who are on extended term assignments and enjoy campus studies.

For a listing of universities in Europe, visit <http://www.forumjam.co.uk/univ/europe/azeurop/listall.html>

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person to facilitate a successful integration to a new country. It is also known that spousal dissatisfaction is a key factor leading to assignment failure. In Yvonne McNulty's 2001 study on trailing spouses, roughly 40 percent expat assignments postings failed, the majority because of the lack of family or spousal adjustment.

What a university programme will cost

The costs vary, depending on the type and scope of programme, programme length, and the international reputation of the school.

A single course taken through an online school will cost approximately EUR 1600 euros.

An MBA costs between EUR 22,500 and EUR 34,000.

An executive MBA is much higher and can cost anywhere between EUR 38,000 and EUR 58,500.

While not all companies are willing to cover the cost of education for expats and their spouses, many do. According to the 2002 Global Relocation Trends Survey, 50 percent of respondent companies included provisions for spouses, and of those who did, 36 percent provided education/training assistance for them.

According to Marie-Josée Savoie, head of the HR Division, European Space Agency (ESA), the organisation will pay for 100 percent of the cost of education/training as long as it is directly related to individual's job.

For those interested in taking a course for personal development, ESA shares the cost with the employee. Although ESA does not currently have any educational assistance in place for accompanying spouses, they do offer a variety of other support services.

In developing policy, HR professionals should investigate whether offering an education allowance for an expat and/or their spouse would improve acceptance rates of an assignment and if it would assist the spouse's ability to integrate more easily.

In addition, policies must be flexible so they can be applied on an individualised basis and be adapted as the business environment changes.

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