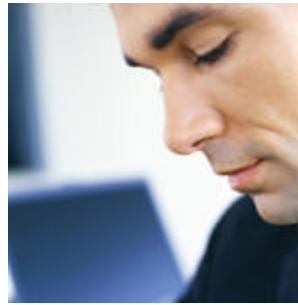


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## Who looks after HR abroad?

After reading this story of a senior HR manager on assignment in Europe you may well ask if top level HR professionals have taken adequate steps to cover themselves while on assignment. Robin Pascoe reports.



The manager in question experienced a major family crisis - the death of a spouse - which left him not only bereft and with young children to look after, but working for a company that had no policies in place to help him.

"I think that having a problem like mine happen to a person in HR is the worst place possible for an employee," says this expatriate employee. He prefers that the details of his tragedy to remain anonymous, but feels that by telling his story, others may be helped in the future.

"Normally, my own HR professional would have been working out some support to help me. But because it happened to someone senior like myself working in HR, the human resource function - at my company at least, although I think it's probably more widespread - had great difficulty in responding in the same way as it would have for any other employee."

Jeroen Riemeijer who works for Shell International as an HR consultant and was recently on an expatriate assignment to Malaysia, confirms that local HR support towards expatriate HR staff is a concern.

"It is very much the perception of 'he should know, so why would we care'," says Riemeijer. "That is the down side for an HR person on assignment."

HR consultant Carrie Shearer agrees. "HR falls through the cracks more often than we think or expect," says Shearer, who has worked abroad in HR for an oil company. "And the higher up you go in the corporation, the more it occurs."

Shearer adds, "If you're the HR person in charge of international, then technically you look after yourself on assignment. However, this can create a conundrum. Most HR folks in the field tend to be hardest on themselves. As a result they don't receive the same help and assistance that they would if they were someone else in the company."

She uses her own experience to illustrate her point. For the first few months on assignment in Singapore, Shearer



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says she was broke because someone in payroll at her headquarters had decided to pay her salary and allowances into her American bank account.

"The form I filled in to draw a portion of my money locally was ignored. If I were a typical expat, I would have handled the situation. But since I could not sign for myself, it took until the CEO flew through Singapore before I could get the proper signature."

The European-based HR professional who lost his spouse confirms, "I was self-regulating my situation all the way." He too believes that if he had been a local employee, rather than an expatriate one essentially responsible for himself, he would very likely have been put on a disability leave in order to allow his grief to subside and to have the time to organize new family arrangements since he was left a single father with young children.

"But it never crossed my radar screen to take a leave, nor did any doctor or indeed anyone at my company suggest it," he says.

Fortunately, a friend and colleague in HR seized his friend's situation to introduce a pilot employee assistance programme, a project that happened to include grief counselling as a component.

"I know that I would be in a much less positive place today if not for introduction of that programme," admits the widowed HR manager.

"Mine was not a crisis like getting arrested or having a medical emergency," he adds. "Most of us have envisioned those types of crises and put something into place. In my case it covered a pretty long time, through my wife's illness and death and then afterwards and so it wasn't just a single crisis situation. But it's definitely the issues outside work that are real challenges for international assignments."

HR departments shouldn't wait until one of their own is hit by tragedy to start reconsidering where the gaps may be in their expatriate family policies, according to IHR researcher and PhD candidate Yvonne McNulty. She believes that kind of reactive rather than proactive stance reflects badly on HR in general.

"It only begs the question: who else may this have happened to in the company?" believes McNulty. "It can also reflect badly on HR's attitudes towards other division's employees if policies only get revised because it happened to impact on one of their own."

Regardless of what may motivate the introduction of new family related policy, it can only benefit the company in the long run.

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**Preferred Moving Partner**



"We've come a long way in our approach to expats but we also have a ways to go," says the widowed HR manager in Europe of his own company. "We now have more central policy and process to support relocation. As well, HR involvement in the assignment process is significantly more than it was before. All of this is positive for the company and for the employees."

But in the meantime, if you're an HR manager contemplating a posting abroad, HR consultant Shearer has some good advice to heed before you leave home.

"Ideally, think it all through before the assignment so that there are no problems. It's ridiculous to need to report to the CEO if you're a senior level HR manager. There should be someone in HR who can be given oversight responsibility for you. Otherwise, you may find yourself in very awkward situations."

At the end of the day, though, Shell International's Jeroen Riemeijer believes HR should still try to go abroad.

"It helps HR understand the real issues," says Riemeijer who has provided service to expatriates in Holland as well as abroad. "You do learn what it means to arrive at an airport without anything being arranged. No house, no school, just nothing. It was a tough but essential learning."

December 2003

*Robin Pascoe is the author of four books on global living and publishes the popular web site [www.expatexpert.com](http://www.expatexpert.com)*

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