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## Career programmes: cost, risks and HR's role

The price of a career programme depends on what type you purchase. But also be sure that HR does not get in the way of a successful transition. Yvonne McNulty reports in the second of a two-part series on how to evaluate a career programme.



Part 1: [How to evaluate a career programme](#)

For some spouses, the dual-career solution may not end up being a paid job in their chosen profession; it may instead be a volunteer position offering professional development experience in a related field. For others it may be an opportunity to start their own business. Or to continue their education and add some post-graduate degrees to their resume.

Whatever the outcome may be, most spouses benefit enormously from the expertise of career transition programmes catering to their unique needs. But what should these programmes cost? And are there other options?

### What should it cost?

Jane Smith, at Options Resource and Career Center, says costs will vary depending on the types of services offered: individual vs. group, one-to-one meetings vs. e-mail communication, full service programme vs. resume writing, and so on.

The fees for comprehensive career transition programmes in the US range from USD 1800 to USD 3500 and perhaps higher, she says. This will depend on the type of service offered, time available, and additional amenities.

"But there are programmes available where the spouse may choose specific functions as opposed to a more comprehensive approach," says Smith.

"Experience has shown, however, that many people may think they only need emphasis in one particular area, but find that assistance on various levels is actually more productive. Comprehensive programmes do provide more latitude in covering a number of career topics.

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"And there are comprehensive programmes which can vary in time or scope, thus providing the company and the spouse a choice of service modules (for example 6 hours or 12 hours) depending on how much they wish to spend."

Peter Kranenburg, at C&G Career Services in the Netherlands, says that spouse career-transition programmes usually come in two forms – those that are very complete and offer a lot of active assistance, and those with limited services requiring more work on the part of the spouse.

Programmes are, therefore, priced in relation to the hours of service provided. So a simple programme of just a few hours can start at approximately EUR 400, up to a full executive programme at EUR 8000.

Says Peter, "We believe that a balanced programme consists of two phases. Phase 1 is 'research', which must give the spouse a clear picture of career opportunities in the new country before deciding to relocate.

"Phase 2 is 'action' where the career counselor actively assists the spouse in finding suitable employment or other career related activities."

Alain Verstandig, managing director of Brussels-based Net Expat, says that a reasonably priced programme should range from between USD 2,500 up to USD 7,000. The final cost will depend on the extent of the support.

"Overall, the cost will vary depending on the country, the number of hours of services and the type of programme purchased," says Laura Lloyd at Resource Careers, "but the quality of the service should never be compromised by a lower price."

### What are the risks?

According to the job-hunting book *What Colour Is Your Parachute*, hourly services are the safest and most reputable option, because they represent the lowest risk. Yet the greatest risk does not appear to be in the higher priced programmes either.

Verstandig believes the greatest risk lies in the lower priced "budget" or "special value" programmes that promise a lot but inevitably deliver very few worthwhile services.

"The typical cause of failures in these programmes," says Verstandig, "is the mismatch between the promises that are made and what is actually delivered. Too often the programme fee is too low to offer the spouse the serious support they need, yet, this is only discovered after the move."

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Verstandig explains this is not the fault of the vendors offering these programmes. Instead, it is a direct result of companies needing to find creative ways to persuade spouses to relocate, and often results in "fake" services being offered.

As a result, inexperienced spouses will rarely ask enough specific questions to determine if the programme being offered will actually meet their specific needs and be of any real value to them once on assignment. In these instances, says Verstandig, the deception is not revealed until after the move, at which point it is too late to change their mind about relocating.

Another risk, says Verstandig, is what he calls "the killing choice." This is when companies let spouses decide if they will cash in the spouse assistance fee, or actually use the programme.

"Unfortunately most spouses will take the money, expecting to be able to catch a job in the new country through mass mailing or web searches," he says.

"But they discover once the money is gone that finding a job, on your own, in a new country is quite a challenge. Unfortunately, by then it's too late as they are no longer entitled to receive any company-sponsored career assistance."

Yet, of all the risks Verstandig described, the most surprising one of all is that spouse assistance policies are kept "too confidential."

According to Verstandig, this is a situation where a spousal policy is not openly communicated, and results in spouses not being aware that career assistance is even available to them as an option.

"In effect," he says, "the HR department is waiting for the spouse to come and complain about their situation and beg for solutions. Unfortunately, only 20 percent of the most motivated and desperate spouses will go to HR and request assistance. The remaining 80 percent will learn about the programme's existence far too late, and will of course be furious – and still unemployed.

"The point in telling you this," continues Verstanding, "is to educate spouses about their options. If a company wants to offer spousal support, they have to do it the right way and pay an appropriate fee to purchase programmes that are not only of direct value, but are also well communicated."

### **So what makes a successful programme?**

Jane Smith at Options Resource and Career Center says that a successful programme is based primarily on an

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understanding of the spouse's expectations and what the programme offers.

Unrealistic expectations and unrealised goals are no-win situations for all concerned; the individual spouse, the service provider and the company providing the benefit.

"If a spouse is interested in utilising a programme," she says, "there should be a detailed conversation with the programme director (or other appropriate person) to define what the spouse is looking to accomplish. This open discussion should cover all facets of the available service, timing, procedures, prior experience and so on."

Since each individual is unique, a good comprehensive programme should offer enough flexibility to meet specific needs.

For instance, can the spouse concentrate 75 percent of the time on one particular area of the job search and not have to use other components? Is the programme available over an extended length of time?

Many programmes are available for up to a year after the relocation date. Once a spouse begins the programme there is usually a defined (but generous) time frame for utilisation.

One key to success is to present enough adequate information upon initiation of the programme so that the participant and the career consultant are working toward the same goal and there is a process available if miscommunication occurs.

### **Are there other options?**

If a paid job is not at the top of a spouse's priority list they may prefer to research their career options independently with the help of these highly recommended (and less expensive) resources (see [Recommended books and websites](#) below).

The value of doing preliminary research — before committing to an expensive career programme — lies in each spouse's definition of what a career means to them.

Many spouses often find that an international assignment is a good time to re-evaluate their career. Books and websites on career transitions can stimulate new ideas and provide inspiration for making decisions, including whether or not to use a formal career programme.

"But don't forget," says Jane Smith, "that if a spouse does not want to pursue paid employment, but wishes to explore different areas of interest and develop new skills, a career transition programme can still be useful. Working

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with the career consultant, a spouse can utilise assessment tools, develop a resume, or explore opportunities for further education, internships, or high-profile volunteer work."

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"The spouse will ultimately add experience to their CV or resume and that will be an asset in seeking future employment either at some later point in the assignment, or in another location," she says.

Perhaps Valerie Scane, an Indonesia-based expat with over 10 years trailing spouse experience, offers the best advice.

"I think for someone who is serious about pursuing a career when they relocate (as opposed to just a job), a lot of work needs to be done before, during and after the assignment to really support the process," says Scane.

"To do it well I think the spouse needs a career coach, but not necessarily the traditional kind of coach that is offered through a run-of-the-mill spouse programme. In my experience an expat coach is an excellent alternative, because they focus not only on career transition issues, but life transitions issues as well."

July 2003

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## **Recommended books and websites**

**What Colour Is Your Parachute 2003 Edition** and [www.jobhuntersbible.com](http://www.jobhuntersbible.com)  
by Richard Nelson Bolles, 2003, Ten Speed Press

**Working Identity: Unconventional Strategies for Reinventing Your Career**  
by Herminia Ibarra, 2003, Harvard Business School Press

**The Pathfinder: How to Choose or Change Your Career for a Lifetime of Satisfaction and Success**  
Nicholas Lore, 1998, Fireside

**A Career In Your Suitcase 2**  
by Jo Parfitt, 2002, Summertime Publishing

**Sell Yourself Without Selling Your Soul -- A**

**Woman's Guide to Promoting Herself, Her Business, Her Product, or Her Cause with Integrity and Spirit**

by Susan Harrow, 2002, 1st Edition, Harper Collins

**Branding Yourself -- How to Look, Sound and Behave Your Way to Success and [www.successandbalance.com](http://www.successandbalance.com)**

by Mary Spillane, 2000, Pan Books

*Compiled by Yvonne McNulty*

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