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## How to evaluate a career programme

Before investing in a programme that promises a smooth career transition for your trailing spouses, first find out what you will get for your money. Yvonne McNulty reports.



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One of the greatest challenges in international mobility is the dual-career dilemma, and many organisations now offer specialised career transition programmes for the international accompanying spouse.

The aim of these programmes is to increase the "willingness-to-go" factor of international assignments. But what should you get for your money? And in an industry that is largely unregulated, how can you tell if you're dealing with expert professionals?

Based on my own recent experience with a US-based career transition programme, I discovered that failure occurs more often than most companies would like to admit.

Unfortunately I also found myself operating in an environment in which I knew more about the intricacies of the international work-permit arena than my career coach. The lesson? Buyer beware.

If you are in the market for an international spouse career transition programme, either for yourself or your employees, I offer the following practical strategies – based on interviews with five industry leaders — for getting the most out of your potential investment before you sign on the dotted line.

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### 1. Do your homework

Reference-check the programme with direct users of the advertised service, namely accompanying spouses.

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The best-selling job-hunting book, *What Colour Is Your Parachute?*, says be cautious of vendors who show letters from ecstatically happy former clients, but prevent you from talking to them.

Recent statistics illustrate that even the best career counselors achieve a success rate of only 86 percent — in a good year. Therefore, how success and failure is managed and measured is a key indicator of a quality programme.



According to Alain Verstandig, managing director of Brussels-based Net Expat, a minimum success rate of 80 percent is a good target for a company advertising or promoting their services in this industry.

"In some challenging countries with tough job market conditions or tight work permit regulations, this could drop to 70 percent" he says, "but be careful with the definition of a success rate: at Net Expat we base our measure on the evaluation of the candidate, not the career coach."

**Buyer Beware:** *It is not uncommon for a vendor to claim that it is a breach of privacy for you to discuss their services directly with their end-users. Instead — in an attempt to find a middle ground to satisfy your concerns — they may arrange for you to speak with an outsourcing or HR Manager whose company has used their services for many years. The result is usually a glowing reference not dissimilar to the 'success stories' printed in the vendor's promotional brochure. Ask yourself, are you getting the truth or another sales pitch?*

## 2. Try before you buy

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Critically analyse advertised website resources. Negotiate try-before-you-buy access to the members-only section of a website to verify that the resources being offered are both unique and time-saving.

Double-check that pre-paid memberships to exclusive job-search websites advertised as an inclusion in the programme fees do, in fact, exist. A members-only link to a job-search URL already freely available on the web is not an "exclusive" feature.

Never agree to pay the fees in full before the commencement of services — even if you are buying the programme in bulk for your organisation. If you are asked for the fees upfront, decline and negotiate part-payment over a six- or 12-month period during which time you still have some negotiating power if the programme fails to deliver (plus some time to check in with your spouses to see if they're getting value for money).

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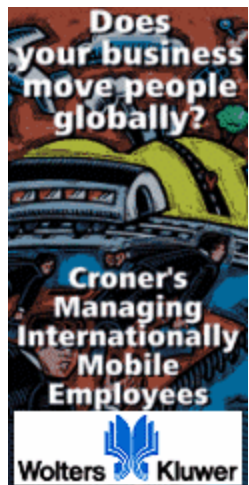
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"Always try to have a success fee (as we have at Net Expat)," says Alain, "as it will motivate a career coach to find the client a nice job, and always double-check cheap programmes because they usually end up being a pure loss of money."

**Buyer Beware:** *Of those job-search sites you or your spouses may wish to join and for which no trial membership is available, special permission from the vendor is required to have it included as an added benefit in the programme fees. This process often takes weeks to activate and the result can be a significant amount of wasted time in attempting to gain access to resources rather than actually using them.*

### 3. Define your networking needs

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If networking is a key component of a job-search plan (and it usually is) be sure to flesh out with the vendor the type of networking opportunities you expect and ensure they can deliver. For example, a lot of networking can be done through web-based forums. But face-to-face networking is also critical.

According to Jane Smith, President at US-based Options Resource and Career Center, "A vendor should be able to provide some networking opportunities for a client. However, it is essential that the programme participant understands that a networking lead does not mean 'this person will hire you.'

"In researching a potential vendor, the HR Manager should check out their reputation, ask for references, and determine the level of service that is required but they also need to remember that the individual spouse must be an active player in the career transition process, especially with their own networking" she says.

Sally Katz, manager at Paris-based Partnerjob.com, agrees. "Our programme is not a miracle tool. Both spouses and HR managers must actively use the website to fulfill its potential as an innovative and effective response to the dual career challenge. Each user will get from Partnerjob.com what he or she puts into it."

**Buyer Beware:** *Web-based networking is commonly advertised as a unique feature of career-transition programmes yet these forums often consist of little more than a list of 'how to' articles on topics such as how to dress for an interview or how to write a cover letter. Such misrepresentations can lead you to question whether your interpretation of networking is perhaps out of sync with the vendors. The solution? Be specific about what*

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sort of networking you expect and ask to see examples of forums in actual operation before you sign up.

#### 4. Expect region-specific resources

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For organisations with a truly international workforce, be sure to ascertain that the programme being offered is not specific to one geographic location such as the US or Canada.

As an HR Manager or spouse, you need to be sure you are receiving access to both real-time local resources *and* a local career coach with an understanding of the international career challenges being addressed.

"The career coach needs to be a resident of the specific country/region that they will service, and most familiar with the way in which a career-search is conducted within that country" says Laura J Lloyd, director of dual-career services at US-based Resource Careers. "He or she needs to act as a coach, making certain the spouse understands both the major and subtle differences in the acceptable job search methods and techniques in a new country."

It is also important to have career opportunities and networks outside of paid employment, including continuing education institutions and volunteer organisations.

**Buyer Beware:** *A specific feature to expect from the programme must be the ability to fast-track access to the major job-search sites or companies in the spouse's geographical region and specific to a spouse's career interests and ambitions. This does not mean being provided with a list of every company within a 20- mile radius of the home address to whom the spouse can make cold-calls. This type of 'shot-gun' approach wastes a significant amount of time and effort and is not what you are paying for.*

#### 5. Beware of training-the-trainer

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It is important that a career-transition is conducted in an environment in which the career coach has an understanding of the intricacies of the work-permit laws pertinent to the geographical region in which your expats are living.

Unfortunately, too many vendors rely on outsourcing this function to immigration law firms who, as part of the programme fees, will provide the spouse with a one-hour consultation – usually over the phone – to explain in detail the work-permit environment in which they're attempting to find a paid job.

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Not only is this approach time-consuming, but it often becomes an additional expense after the first consultation. This is because every subsequent call and/or consultation with the immigration law firm usually incurs an additional fee (payable directly to the law firm) not covered by the programme fees already paid.

Whilst the general justification for this approach is based on a preference for leaving such detailed areas of immigration law to the "experts", it highlights the importance of asking what, exactly, the programme fees will cover.

**Buyer Beware:** *Negotiate your fees and ask for break-downs (in hours, if necessary) regarding how much time your money actually buys you with any outsourced professional services. Have procedures in place to replace a coach if you are not truly satisfied with the experience they bring to the programme. After all, you're paying for it.*

## 6. Know the difference: domestic versus international expertise

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Unfortunately, too many programmes attempt to generalise a domestic career transition experience and apply it to an international clientele. Such programmes usually end up being superficial, inadequate and misleading – at best.

If faced with this situation a client should seek a refund and here's why: a spouse relocating from Colorado to Florida will not encounter the same language or work-permit challenges as those of a spouse relocating from Colorado to Brussels, or London to Hong Kong.

According to Peter Kranenburg, managing director at C&G Career Services in the Netherlands, spouses without work permits have more difficulties, which in practice limits the channels they can use to find a job.

A domestic approach to their job-search obviously won't be as effective and shouldn't be used. "In these cases," he says, "we focus much more on networking and approaching suitable employers directly, instead of using employment agencies. These spouses just need more time and effort but if they are qualified enough (especially at the bachelor-degree level) they will find their way with our assistance."

**Buyer Beware:** *International career manuals peppered with case-study after case-study outlining the challenges of the domestically relocated spouse are a big clue that you're probably not getting international expertise.*

## Conclusion

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Managing the dual-career challenge is not easy, but, according to Sally Katz at Partnerjob.com, it need not be a nightmare either.

"Employees and spouses should let the employer know that they have a dual-career issue PRIOR to a transfer," she says. "Being up-front on both sides can help to avoid unrealistic expectations because it is important to be straightforward with spouses and to give them the information that they need to decide *whether* to accept a transfer."

**Next month:** What should it cost? Are there other options?

June 2003

*Yvonne McNulty is an Australian doctoral candidate at Monash University and an accompanying spouse currently on assignment in Philadelphia, USA. She neither represents nor endorses the companies quoted in this article but recognises them as leaders in their field. She can be contacted at [ymcnulty@thetrailingspouse.com](mailto:ymcnulty@thetrailingspouse.com) and [www.thetrailingspouse.com](http://www.thetrailingspouse.com).*



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