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Yvonne McNulty

Trials of the trailing spouse

23.02.2002 - Living overseas to advance a partner's career can be daunting. JULIE MIDDLETON reports.

It sounds glamorous and exciting - moving overseas because of your partner's well-paid job.

Can't work yourself because of red tape? Doesn't matter. It's a chance to enjoy a comfortable, paid OE, take a break from office politics, maybe do some study at leisure ...

The reality can be altogether less elegant. Career-minded "trailing spouses" - usually women - no longer have their jobs or the financial and social independence they offer.

Relationship dynamics change, and loss of self-esteem, confidence and professional identity often follow.

Here's candid Australian Yvonne McNulty, who gave up a job with PriceWaterhouseCoopers to move to Chicago with her Scottish husband, Stephen. Both are now in Philadelphia.

"Our first three months in Chicago were exciting and thrilling. We absolutely loved the new experience and I relished not having to work," says McNulty.

"That I could not work, even if I wanted to, seemed to make the arrangement even sweeter.

"By the end of the first three months, however, I was starting to wonder why I was even bothering to get out of bed. My day just seemed to revolve around doing house chores and finding something meaningful to do.

"I became depressed, emotional and rather demanding. I was confused, lost and very lonely.

"My self-esteem was non-existent and my self-confidence completely disappeared. I began to seriously question what I had gotten myself into."

"Guesstimates" from recruitment agencies and major mover Allied Pickford make the Australian cities of Melbourne, Perth and Sydney the top destinations for relocated New Zealanders, followed by Singapore and Hong Kong, then Britain, Europe and the United States.

But a trawl of research suggests that of every 10 relocations involving partners and families, three or four will fail.

The cost and disruption to business can be enormous. And partner dissatisfaction is cited by 96 per cent of those who suffer "expatriate failure", says American relocation management company Windham International in its 2000 Global Trends Survey.

The reality is that in a world where couples are increasingly dual-career, not just dual-income, companies ignore partners' aspirations at their peril.

Research by PriceWaterhouseCoopers among 270 companies employing 65,000 expatriates found that the factors rated least important by companies were the very things that seemed to underpin relocation failures - partners' adaptability and dual career management.

Executives see a double-edged sword when relocation is mooted, and are shying away. PWC says 80 per cent of companies report major and increasing difficulty recruiting executives to go overseas.

The Global Trends Survey says that employees often turn down overseas promotion because of "spousal career issues." Yet the same survey indicates that only 23 per cent of companies help partners find work in their new homes.

Unable to work, McNulty decided to polish off a human resources degree. The discovery, via the internet, of women in similar situations helped McNulty make sense of her feelings: "I learned to accept my experience as a completely normal part of being a trailing spouse."

When offered the chance to do post-graduate research, she couldn't pass up the plight of the trailing spouse. More than 130 trailing partners responded to a questionnaire through the website McNulty started - www.thetrailingspouse.com. She has released preliminary findings focused on 80 of them.

- * Most - 94 per cent - are women, and most are under 40.
- * Ninety-six per cent are married.
- * They call 27 different countries a home away from home.
- * They are highly educated - more than 80 per cent hold a bachelor's degree.
- * 70 per cent categorise themselves as being in a "dual-career" relationship - even if they aren't working.

But 56 per cent are unable to work, most commonly because of work permit restrictions (61 per cent) or because their qualifications aren't recognised (12 per cent).

Of the 44 per cent who said they could work, many had changed tack, embarking on new careers that were more manageable or portable and were a better fit in their expatriate lives than their original careers.

But only a quarter of the respondents said assistance provided by the relocating company was good.

And what about the small number of men following their wives? Their experiences are no different, says McNulty.

"One male trailing spouse said he found it soul-destroying sometimes to have to rely on his wife for even the basics in the host country - being dependent on her employment status and the company for housing, money, medical benefits, a vehicle, and approval for certain expenses.

"Retaining his own identity seemed impossible sometimes."

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