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## It takes two

Robin Pascoe, Canadian author of three popular books on expatriate adjustment

Companies who relocate their employees abroad can rarely afford for an expatriate assignment to fail. An unsuccessful assignment can cost an organisation between three to four times that of an expatriate employee's salary.

Yet many expat assignments do fail and a core reason is the dissatisfaction of the employee's accompanying spouse or family. A survey in 2001 of 100 leading multinationals by the resource and employee benefits consultancy WM Mercer concluded, "most assignments fail due to family difficulties". The study also found that family circumstances are the least likely to be considered before going on an assignment.

Even with varied and limited support from companies, the life of an expat spouse is hard enough. Employment laws in many countries either restrict or forbid employment of expat spouses, even in countries such as France, Germany, Japan and the US. Only a few countries automatically grant work permits to accompanying expat spouses, namely European Union citizens moving within in the EU, and expat spouses in Australia, Sweden, Venezuela and the UK. In those countries that do grant work permits to accompanying spouses, application procedures are bureaucratic and can take anything up to six months to process. Consequently, the proportion of expat spouses estimated to be in work is between 20 to 30 per cent, compared to between 50 and 80 per cent of spouses "at home".

There are signs, however, that the issue of expat spouses is being addressed both at corporate and country levels. The Permits Foundation, a coalition of 20 large multinationals including AstraZeneca, British Telecommunications, Diageo, ICI, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Royal Dutch/Shell and Unilever, lobbies governments worldwide to develop better laws on expat spouse employment. MEWS (Multi-national Employers for Working Spouse) is striving to promote the benefits of expat-friendly employment laws in the US.

Armed with MBAs, PhDs and other academic degrees in related disciplines, a growing number of spouses are now researching and offering business and management solutions to their own challenges. "Spousal research is definitely surfacing as a hot topic as more expats are declining assignments, forcing organisations to struggle to meet manpower," says US-based researcher Yvonne McNulty, an Australian student of international human resource management (IHRM).

"Trailing spouses have been annoyed that the kind of research being conducted about their issues often fails to come close to the heart of the matter," says Ms McNulty. Her research uncovered six inter-related trailing spouse needs: the quality

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of international human resource management support; the pivotal role of families in successful expatriation; a strong and effective communication link between the sponsoring organisation and the non-employee spouse; juggling the work priorities of the transferring spouse; addressing the unique fulfilment needs of accompanying partners; and the "gains and losses" associated with international mobility for all members of the family.

### **Ignoring the real issues**

All of these are largely bypassed in current expatriate management. "Corporate expatriate policy largely ignores the trailing spouse's intrinsic needs as irrelevant, inappropriate or inconsequential," says Ms McNulty. Yet Lyn Glanz, a British PhD student at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, says: "Existing research tells us that spouse mobility is important in the decision to accept overseas assignments, particularly based on dual career issues."

How overseas assignments are managed by internationally inexperienced company HR -particularly the lack of voice given to the spouse throughout the process - has emerged as a key issue impacting on how today's accompanying spouse copes with a move. Valerie Scane, a Canadian researcher, says "External power structures control the spouse's access to information. The accompanying partner can't speak openly and feels inhibited to make demands of his or her own, to be heard, and to ask for what she or he needs."

One of the most frequent conclusions produced by spousal research is the need for more corporate relocation support to the spouse throughout the overseas assignment and not just before a family moves. All too often expats are simply thrown in the deep end and spouses can find themselves in a new social environment without support, work or information.

Tonya Foust Mead, an American researcher based in Brazil, confirms the view that spouses not only know their needs the best but that they are the best people to ask about relocation challenges. "The input received from expatriate partners reflects the absolute consensus of the expatriate family. It's far more valuable, accurate and honest in capturing the total family portrait than of the expatriate employee alone."

### **Fighting back**

Expat spouses have responded with enthusiasm to many of these research surveys. "Information and research, which expatriates can now acquire via the internet, can be used as a powerful tool," says Lyn Glanz in her research paper *Expatriate Stories: The Role of HR Departments in Relation to Informal Storytelling in Expatriation*. "Not only can policy be influenced, but the negotiating of expatriate benefits will definitely be impacted and assignees will be able to effectively side-step the bottleneck of information that should flow from Human Resources."

Ms Glanz concludes that when expatriates share their experiences informally with each other, Human Resources lose control of the expatriation process. She adds that many changes to how companies communicate with their expatriates are happening without adequate study, as these informal information systems fall outside established research.

More importantly, Ms Glanz believes there will be a tremendous impact on the knowledge management of global assignments. "HR may well lose the ability to check and validate the expatriate experience of the organisations' employees and families as a continuous two-way learning process."

This could be a dangerous precedent. A survey on expatriation trends by WorldatWork, the National Foreign Trade Council, and CIGNA International Expatriate Benefits published last year, found that 73 per cent of HR managers who

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responded expect their expatriate population to increase over the next five years. Yet a third of expats on assignment said their company does "a poor job" meeting their various needs. The survey concludes that HR departments, "may not be aware of the lack of support expatriates feel they are getting while they are on assignment, or how strongly they feel about this.

### Useful websites

- General policy and research. [www.shrmglobal.org](http://www.shrmglobal.org)
- 2002 Mercer Global HR Conferences in October [www.wmmercercer.com](http://www.wmmercercer.com)
- Archives of published global HR/mobility issues [www.personneltoday.com/search](http://www.personneltoday.com/search)
- European Foundation for Management Development [www.efmd.be](http://www.efmd.be)
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- European HR issues [www.expatica.com/hr](http://www.expatica.com/hr)
- Robin Pascoe online community [www.expatexpert.com](http://www.expatexpert.com)
- Cranfield University's School of Management conducts extensive expatriate research and offers online resources [www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som](http://www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som)
- Anne-Wil K. Harzing (MA, PhD) is a lecturer at the University of Melbourne and her research interests include expatriate management [www.harzing.com](http://www.harzing.com)
- Loyola University Library Chicago is considered one of the best online resource libraries in the US <http://libraries.luc.edu>

