



The Dual Career Dilemma

Supporting the accompanying spouse's career path

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“So, what do you do?” It is a question that, in western society, is a large part of how we define ourselves.

It is also a very real concern for the accompanying spouse on an international assignment. Imagine the impact on your identity, self-esteem, and overall happiness to suddenly go from ‘having a career’ to not working. That is the dilemma of the accompanying spouse. The initial enthusiasm of an overseas assignment can fade once the realization hits that your career path may have to be put on hold.

The success of an international assignment depends on many factors. According to the PriceWaterhouseCoopers International Assignments Key Trends 1999/2000, the most common reason for failure is intercultural adaptability of the spouse. Companies are realizing that helping spouses to find employment, if that is their wish, can aid in the spouses’ adjustment. Benefits of a working spouse include additional income and a sense of continuity in their life while dealing with adapting. It can help them to understand the culture, and develop their own social base and support network.

Spouse employment is becoming a factor in choosing to take an assignment in the first place. In fact, 77% of respondent’s in Employment Relocation Council’s (ERC) 2000 International survey asserted that when employees are reluctant to relocate abroad, it is primarily the result of spouse employment issues. A 2001 survey by PWC

and UK- based Market & Opinion Research International (MORI) entitled Managing Mobility – A European Perspective, found 49% of respondents gave “employment opportunities for spouses” as a key barrier to mobility. Also recent figures show it is no longer just women who are the ‘trailing spouses’ but about 18% are men. More and more, both private sector and government organizations realize that in order to manage international assignments successfully they will have to focus on the needs of dual-career couples.

So what can organizations do to help the accompanying spouse continue working? Some solutions include: job hunting trips prior to relocation, inter/intra company networking, career counselling, local job search assistance, legal assistance with work restrictions, membership in professional associations and attendance of conferences, workshops, seminars, educational support, child care provisions while conducting job search, language lessons, cross-cultural training, and commuter marriage support. Here are a few examples of how organizations are utilizing some of these ideas and providing support for spouses.

The United States government is piloting a programme called the Spouse Networking Assistance Program (SNAP) in order to better serve the employment needs of spouses of US Embassy employees.

SNAP is designed to help those spouses who would like to continue

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in their field of expertise to do so within their new 'host location' local economies. In London, the program provides spouses with workshops on effective CV writing as well as coaching on job search techniques specific to the UK. Participants in SNAP also have access to a computer program to help create a country specific CV and a database of companies and professional contacts. The Embassy will also work closely with FOCUS Information Services, giving membership to 35 spouses who will then be able to join the FOCUS Job Search Group and get a free copy of the FOCUS "Launching Your Career in the UK Job Guide". FOCUS and the Embassy will be co-hosting workshops and seminars for their constituent job searchers.

SNAP will be implemented largely by a Local Employment Advisor (LEA) who performs the legwork of building the professional network for participants. Each participant's career field is taken into consideration and then the LEA makes an initial contact with local professionals in that field with whom they have already formed a relationship while establishing the database. This can save a lot of time and wasted effort.

“Spouses can lose six months to a year floundering around trying to look for contacts,” said Faye Barnes, Family Liaison Office Director, Washington, D.C. “SNAP gives spouses a starting point.”

In some cases, it might be difficult finding a match for the spouse's exact field of expertise. The Local

Employment Advisor can also help the spouse explore different ways to utilize their skills and find alternative employment. They may need to “tilt their hat” a bit and see their skills in a new light. Ultimately SNAP can be of benefit to both spouses and employers - the spouses finding employment quicker and companies having access to a highly skilled work force.

“The point is retention,” said Barnes. “We think of the Foreign Service as a lifetime career, not just a 10-year sojourn. Because dual-career families are the norm in today's world, [The Department of State] will never be able to keep people in service unless we consider their spouses' employment needs too.”

In the private sector, one group of companies has come together to offer a web-based solution for its spouses of employees worldwide. Partnerjob.com is designed to help encourage its employees' mobility by actively promoting the professional placement of the employees' spouses/partners at their new location. Air Liquide, Danone, FCI, Hewlett-Packard, Ondeo, Rhodia, Schlumberger and Thales launched it in September 2000. Partnerjob.com is a non-profit-making association that uses its web site to offer its members a database of job openings worldwide. The jobs are posted by member and other authorized companies. There is also another database of Resume/CVs posted by the partners of expatriate employees of member companies.

Employers and partners can look

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for a good match of qualifications to available positions. As a result they have placed 13 spouses with jobs in member companies.

Another success story is Shell. They established the Spouse Employment Center (SEC) in May of 1995 in response to an internal survey. Their survey highlighted a concern for spouses’ ability to maintain their own careers. The general feeling was that many spouses felt mobility and satisfaction with expatriation would improve if they had help in finding new employment. The Spouse Employment Center offers spouses a wide range of career workshops, resources, and information. The SEC stress they are not a job agency but are there to offer resources and support so that spouses can be empowered to find employment themselves.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution when dealing with this issue, but these examples show ways in which organizations can be flexible and begin to address spouse’s concerns. If your company hasn’t provided you with spouse support perhaps they would consider developing a programme of their own. The first step to establishing a course of action is getting specific feedback from spouses on what kind of assistance they would find most useful!

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