

Coping with expatriation for a spouse



The target audience of this presentation:

- The spouse accompanying her husband on an expatriate assignment.
 - For the purpose of this presentation a spouse refers to a woman who is accompanying her working husband.
 - Expatriation is defined as living in a country which is not the country of permanent residence for a minimum of 3 months.



This presentation will cover:

- Foreign assignment failure
- Motivations and concerns
- The problems linked to expatriation
- The expatriation phases
- The career woman becomes an expat
- The company can help the expat spouse
- The exception – male spouses



Foreign assignment failure

- The number one reason for foreign assignment failure remains spousal and family discontent.
- Spouses who are young, inexperienced in terms of living in a foreign country and who are leaving a career at home to follow their husband are the highest risk category for assignment failure upon expatriation.



Foreign assignment failure

- A non-working spouse may have trouble accepting life in expatriation – isolation (shutting herself away from the world), boredom, culture shock, etc.
- A working spouse who abandons her career for her husband's professional aspirations poses additional problems – professional frustration, deep resentment etc.



Foreign assignment failure

- The company's Human Resources department should manage this process with the employee, spouse and children in a pre-assignment process.
- A good pre-assignment process will reduce the number of assignment failures during expatriation.
- A failed expatriate assignment can cost the company up to \$1 million!



Foreign assignment failure

- The potential future expat spouse should obtain as much information as possible on the future conditions of assignment as well as what she can expect in terms of her new lifestyle.
- It is also important for her to understand her motivations and to voice her concerns well before departure.



Foreign assignment failure

- Before departure, the future expat spouse should obtain information about the following in her new location:
 - possibility of working, even on a voluntary basis
 - size and variety of the expatriate community
 - presence or absence (sometimes prolonged) of her husband for professional reasons leading to isolation
 - existence and quality of local medical facilities
 - quality of local schools, the existence of an international school



Foreign assignment failure

Before departure, the future expat spouse should obtain information about the following in her new location:

- availability of recreational facilities
- freedom of movement
 - security issues
 - religious imperatives
 - ability to drive
 - local dress codes
 - necessity to be escorted in certain countries



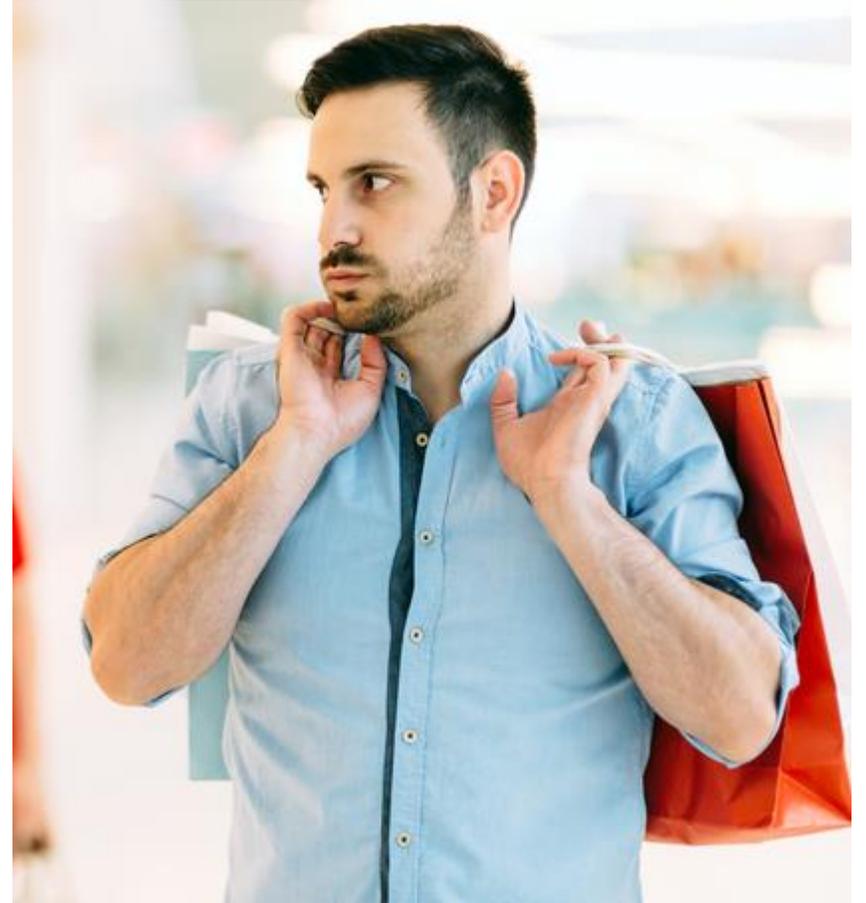
Foreign assignment failure

- All options should be left open.
- At the end of the pre-assignment process a spouse may prefer to decline the expatriation offer for herself and her children and remain home with her friends, family and job.



Foreign assignment failure

- It may sometimes be better to let the husband leave for a foreign assignment and have him rotate back home more often rather than to uproot the entire family and provoke family dramas, depressions and unwelcome upheaval.



Motivations and concerns - Positive

- The positive and negative motivations and concerns must be weighed and discussed with the husband and with the company's HR department.
- It is only at the end of this process that the spouse can make the final decision as to whether she accepts to go on the expatriate assignment or not.



Motivations and concerns - Positive

- I will travel and experience a new country
- My children will learn a new language and culture
- Our family will earn more money during expatriation
- The experience will strengthen our family ties



Motivations and concerns - Negative

- I will need to give up my career.
- Will I be able to find some form of work or activity locally?
- Will I be able to manage on my own in a foreign country?
- Will I be able to occupy my time?
- Will the children be able to adjust to the new country?
- Will we be happy?



The problems linked to expatriation

Everything is usually new in the country of assignment:

- language
- culture
- customs
- religion
- food
- climate
- home comforts



The problems linked to expatriation

Certain problems may rapidly appear:

- physical isolation leading to emotional and psychological problems
- loneliness, boredom, anxiety
- difficulty in communications
- marital difficulties that can lead to certain dependencies (alcohol)



The problems linked to expatriation

- The spouse who is leaving a job in her home country should consider not quitting the job but taking a sabbatical leave.
- This will allow her to return to her previous job at the end of the expatriate assignment.



The problems linked to expatriation

Teenagers may have a harder time adapting to expatriation due to the following:

- Loss of social networks established at school
- Some cultures are more conservative in terms of alcohol, drug use and sexual experimentation to which teenagers may be drawn.
- Relative loss of the parents who are less accessible due to the challenges of the new assignment.



The problems linked to expatriation

Some children may need to be placed in a boarding school far from the parents due to the lack of appropriate schools in the new location.



The expatriation cycle – Before leaving

Selection



Family acceptance



Eagerness = the “honeymoon phase”



Concern - disengagement (job, friends, house, school)



Pulling up the family roots and leaving



The expatriation cycle – Upon arrival

Arrival



Stress – everything is new: sounds, sights, smells



Culture shock and depression



Coping, adjustment, acceptance



The career woman becomes an expat

An accompanying female spouse who has left a promising career at home to follow her husband in expatriation may encounter numerous problems in the new country which may make finding a paying job – within or outside of her professional domain quite difficult:

- difficulty obtaining a work permit
- language issues
- priority given to local employees for many jobs
- lack of long term commitment due to the spouse's mission



The career woman becomes an expat

The spouse may also find that:

- her skills are not transferable to the new country
- she lacks the proper diplomas or licenses to practice in the country (e.g. medical doctor, lawyer)

In addition there may be cultural, political or tax issues making work in the foreign country impossible.

Finding a paid job in a foreign country is extremely difficult.



The career woman becomes an expat

Alternatives exist such as working in the:

- embassy or consulate of one's nationality
- local international school
- local non-governmental organizations
- local assistance programs
- local expatriate clubs



But in most cases, the work is as an unpaid volunteer.

The company can help the expat spouse

Before expatriation, the company can help the spouse and family to prepare for expatriation in numerous manners:

- face to face orientation with the entire family
- provide the opportunity to meet other employees or families who have been in the same location
- provide documentation, CD ROMS, videos concerning the potential new location



The company can help the expat spouse

Some companies have a Spouse Association.

The spouse association, located in the country of assignment, can facilitate arrival of newcomers and offer the arriving spouse with a local network of expat spouses who can provide:

- information on local medical facilities, shopping, schools
- support groups to talk, ask questions and surmount stress and depression



The company can help the expat spouse

Some companies even provide their employees and their families in the foreign country with access to:

- company provided housing, stores, domestic staff, car and driver
- company provided medical facilities
- Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) that can offer advice and support (often by phone) with regards to financial, family or marital problems.



The company can help the expat spouse

The company can sometimes help the expat spouse by:

- offering a job within the company organization, even if not previously employed by the company
- finding a job with another company in the foreign location
- discussing job opportunities in the foreign location with the spouse's current employer at home



The company can help the expat spouse

The company can sometimes help the expat spouse by:

- assisting with work permit obtainment
- providing language courses
- providing counselling in view of free lance or self employment
- assisting in obtaining local recertification or retraining

(e.g. teachers, nurses)



The exception – male spouses

Male spouses accompanying their female working half represent less than 10% of spouses but this is a growing group. Male spouses:

- are atypical and not always well accepted by other expatriates and spouse associations since most of the other spouses are women
- may have more difficulty in finding work than female spouses
- may require more company assistance and support.



Conclusion

- Spouses are one of the major causes for the failure of an expatriate assignment.
- Good pre-assignment preparation and detailed information are essential in reducing failed assignments.
- The career woman has specific needs in terms of finding a job in a foreign country and a paid job may often be impossible to find.
- The husband's company should provide information, support, training and where possible help in finding a job.



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