

Transforming Risk To Asset: Empowering Accompanying Partners In The Relocation Process

As globalisation expands amidst the context of demographic changes so the challenge faced in recruiting and retaining global talent will intensify. There is a growing consensus that in order to succeed, companies will need to integrate the global mobility function into a strategic talent management process. This approach to global mobility will demand a much more rigorous investment-based scrutiny of expatriate assignments, an approach being facilitated by the ground-breaking work of Drs Yvonne McNulty and Kerr Inkson.

Using this approach, accompanying partners (AP), in particular dual-career APs, represent a risk factor in this investment-based approach to relocation whether it be increasing the likelihood that an assignment is turned down, the increased risk of assignment failure, or the loss of assignee productivity when the AP is unhappy and disengaged in the relocation process.

We conducted our Career Choice and the Accompanying Partner Survey in 2012 to understand the complexity of the career choices faced by APs when they support their partners in an overseas assignment. We found that while 80% of APs worked prior to moving, 50% of those full-time, only 44% worked while on assignment and only 16% worked full-time. However, 78% told us that they wanted to work. The reasons accompanying partners didn't work were myriad, they listed practical obstacles such as lack of a work permit, language and professional equivalence; choice issues, frequently choosing to put their children's well-being before their own needs and issues relating to lack of support from the sponsoring organisation as being inhibitors to working. Though 74% of APs felt that the sponsoring organisation should provide life or career support, only 17% actually received it.

We also investigated the fulfilment of APs while on assignment and their overall life satisfaction. We found that whilst around 50% APs were fulfilled and satisfied with life there was a marked difference with those not working

being considerably more likely to rate themselves in the lower categories of both fulfilment and life satisfaction. Most notably, of those who rated themselves as very unfulfilled, 79% were not working.

Based on our research and our work with APs, we believe that the risk they pose to assignments can not only be mitigated but with the right support, APs can be a meaningful asset to the assignment when engaged positively in their new environment. There are 5 key challenges that support programmes must address in order to provide effective support. They are as follows:

1. Organisations must remember that they are relocating a family not just an assignee and that each member of the family will have different needs for support at different times and that their challenges will differ from those of the assignee. Effective support programmes engage the family members by acknowledging their role in the success of the assignment and by trying to understand and meet their individual needs for support.

2. One size doesn't fit all when dealing with APs. Each AP comes to the relocation with their own set of choices, opportunities and constraints and location imposes its own set of challenges. Engagement in understanding the individual AP's needs and objectives and then providing needs driven related support services is key in providing appropriate, valued and cost effective support.

3. Surprises in the relocation process are almost always bad news. A theme of our qualitative data was that APs often feel let down because they make decisions based on incorrect or incomplete information. As this quote demonstrates:

"the support and assistance would ideally have come before we arrived, so I would have something ready or at least a realistic work-seeking plan. However, such support/advice/information was effectively non-existent".

We recommend that support begins before the decision is made, so that APs make informed and therefore more

resilient decisions.

4. Choice doesn't mean happiness. Our survey showed that some accompanying partners choose not to work while overseas so they can focus on supporting their families but that those APs may experience less fulfilling lives. Support should acknowledge the value of this supportive role and recognise that these partners also need help in understanding how they derive fulfilment.

5. Support shouldn't always be about a job search. As discussed above, many APs choose not to work or can't work. They often receive no additional support, as job search assistance is frequently the only additional support provided. However, these APs are often dealing with a greater dislocation. Companies should ensure that those APs are supported to find fulfilment outside of a work context.

By creating support for expatriate families that addresses these 5 challenges, companies help APs to create fulfilling lives for themselves while they are overseas and by doing so the APs become assets to the company in supporting the overall objectives of the assignment.



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