

Expatriate Marriages: What HR Should Know

By: Robin Pascoe

Companies can help to successfully relocate married employees by recognising that relationships are packed up along with the household goods. Robin Pascoe, the author of a new book about mobile marriages, explains.

Before they relocate, couples tend to focus on external matters like where they will live, what schools their children will attend, or where they will buy groceries, according to Dixie Wilson, regional and international employee assistance programme (EAP) coordinator for Houston-based energy giant ConocoPhillips.

“They entirely ignore the key internal challenges for the successful relocation of a relationship,” says Wilson. “In fact, they are often in complete denial about the changes which lie ahead for their marriage.”

“International assignments can pull strong marriages even closer together, or put extra stress on the more strained ones. I make sure I discuss all the potentially stressful issues with them,” she says.

Given that a high percentage of international assignments end in failure because the family (in particular the spouse) does not adjust, there is a lesson to be learned for companies about the importance of preparing employees for all the adjustments that lie ahead, including a shift in the dynamics of the marriage.

One of the biggest changes will be the profound impact on a spouse’s self-esteem over the inability to work and earn a paycheck, a situation that will radically alter the balance of power in a marriage. There may also be children or elderly parents left behind in boarding schools or nursing homes. The employee’s new job could require a 24/7 work schedule and frequent business trips, which can leave a spouse lonely and depressed.

More than 50 percent of the 200 people surveyed in the research for my new book, *A Moveable Marriage: Relocate Your Relationship without Breaking It*, did not give any thought to the relationship before they moved.

“The divorce rate in the US is about 50 percent right now and 60 percent for second marriages. The same problems that would occur at home happen overseas too but people don’t consider that,” says ConocoPhillips’ DixieWilson. She believes a total renegotiation of the marriage agreement needs to be undertaken if a couple is going to understand each other in a relocation scenario.

Dr Audrey Schuler, a former US diplomatic spouse who now runs Global Nomad Coach agrees with Wilson’s notion of renegotiating a marriage before it leaves home.

Based on interviews with expat women for her research into expatriate marriages, Dr Schuler writes in her monthly newsletter *Global Nomad Transitions*:

“I noticed that [these women] did not assume that their relationship could or should continue exactly as it had been before. They did not make small alterations here and there to fit. Instead, they used information about the new country and setting, together with a hard-earned understanding of themselves, to create a new framework for their marriage based on their actual situation.”

Each couple in Dr Schuler's research started examining ways to rearrange themselves in the marriage to promote both understanding and reciprocity in their relationship.

"For example, one wife expressed her desire to distance herself from her husband's work [on the assignment], and to engage in education and activities that she previously had not been able to do. The couple agreed that the change in her role could add to their relationship. He would be informative and flexible about the timing and extent of the activities in which he did want and need her with him. She adjusted her schedule so that she could join with him at these times."

Far from being "dependent", the couple began recognising their relationship as "interdependent", an important factor in the successful relocation of a relationship.

In *A Moveable Marriage*, I also strongly recommend couples make a list of what needs to be renegotiated to avoid disputes between the employee, the spouse and the company.

"To avoid fights, decide between you what is absolutely vital. For instance, if your parents are elderly...find out in advance how many trips back to your home turf the company will pay for. Then get the company to sign an agreement to that effect."

"Likewise, if children are left behind in boarding school or university, there has to be some agreement about the number of trips back and forth that situation will entail...If all of this is talked about in advance and an understanding is reached, there will be less friction between partners, especially if a company reneges."

According to ConocoPhillips' Wilson, unrealistic expectations about the assignment in general and how the relationship will weather it in particular, can be both the couple's and the assignment's undoing.

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