

Repatriating Female Managers

By: Robin Pascoe

As if there aren't already enough repatriation challenges facing overseas employees—re-entry shock, lack of preparation, and lack of recognition for the freshly-acquired international experience being at the top of the list. But there are added layers of stress which women expat managers in particular confront when they return home.

Female managers have to fight to be taken seriously in the first instance in order to be posted abroad on assignment, according to Dr. Margaret Linehan of Ireland's Cork Institute of Technology. But women executives, many of them trailblazers in the international workplace, face other challenges upon repatriation.

The author of the book "Senior Female International Managers: Why So Few?" (Ashgate Publishing 2000), Dr. Linehan discussed the under-researched subject of repatriating women executives at the Inaugural Conference of the International Center of Work and Family, hosted by IESE Business School in Barcelona this past July.

"All the issues of repatriation are enhanced for women executives," Dr. Linehan reported to a special working group at the conference examining the work-family challenges of expatriates and their families.

With academic colleagues, Dr. Linehan has conducted two studies on repatriation of female international executives—in 2002 and 2003—and shortly begins work on a third which will again track the experiences of women managers returning home to Ireland, England, Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium and France. In-depth interviews were carried out with close to sixty managers working in Western Europe.

"Among other professional challenges felt by the repatriating female manager is the fact that the glass ceiling they hit before they left the country is still firmly in place," reports Dr. Linehan. Half of the interviewees in her 2003 study believed that they came up against that ceiling when they returned to their home organizations.

Often, that glass ceiling is self-imposed. "Women tend to sell themselves short," Dr. Linehan writes in the paper she presented at the conference entitled: *Work-Family Conflict and the Repatriation of Female International Managers: Some Empirical Evidence from Western Europe*. "Traditionally, women were not very good at making demands and were not strong enough in voicing these demands," she writes.

This inability to express to the higher powers what they need also applies to repatriation. "They typically won't ask for anything," according to this international business management scholar and that includes requesting the necessary time off to settle in the family, find new housing, or unpack shipments.

"During the repatriation process, if I had been struggling, and needed time off, the company probably would have given it to me, but I would not have asked for it," one manager reported to her.

“A woman has to be very specific about her demands,” another returning executive told her. “If I am clear about what I want, then I’m sure I will get it.”

Dr. Linehan’s studies revealed that the women managers are also grappling more than their male counterparts with work-family challenges once they return home. The pressure of trying to balance work and family upon repatriation can be a lot harder on the female manager.

“If I compare myself to any of my colleagues, I wish I had a wife at home,” one of the managers told Dr. Linehan. “In an international career, this is particularly difficult because when you live abroad [and return home] you do not have the support systems of home.”

The adjustment period—coming and going—for female managers also takes longer where there are additional family and home responsibilities, according to Dr. Linehan’s studies.

“The married managers with children reported that taking international assignments and subsequent repatriations created more conflict for them. They were always conscious of the difficulties their careers caused for family members,” she noted.

One primary concern upon repatriation highlighted by many interviewed for the studies was the need to register children in schools prior to the move home. “They were not made aware of this practical issue and it caused a large amount of distress and worry for them.”

All repatriated managers regardless of gender are confused by the lack of clarity upon their re-entry to the home organization and this significantly impacts on work adjustment. “But in particular, the uncertainty surrounding re-entry is more pronounced for female repatriating managers because of the dependence of other family members on them for support,” Dr. Linehan reports.

Over the last decades, the number of females working abroad has grown. “In turn, this has consequences for the repatriation debate since specific problems arise with female managers. It is clear from the views expressed by the managers that have children that work-family conflicts are a major deterrent to female participation in international management.”

International human resource managers interested in recruiting and retaining the best and brightest of managers in general and female ones in particular, will do well to ensure that everyone is properly prepared—and supported, even without anyone asking for help—for a smooth move home.

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