



Pay, pack and follow... the trials of the trailing spouse

“Pay, pack and follow at your convenience,” wrote Victorian explorer Sir Richard Burton in a telegram to his wife Isabel Burton, as he instructed her to join him on yet another posting to some challenging, far-flung outpost. Sir Richard wasn’t the most supportive of husbands; apart from showing a distinct lack of sympathy for her close shaves with local wildlife, he often left Isabel alone for months and even years on end while he focused on pursuing his career.

Arguably, life for the trailing spouse has improved considerably since the 1860s, but isolation and loneliness – and sometimes the infidelity that ensues – are still the major push factors in the 42 percent failure rate of expat assignments and a divorce rate among expats that is 49 percent higher than the global average.

Although the number of female expatriates is rising, these women are often of the young and single variety. In older expats, nine times out of 10 the leading or working partner is still a man and the expatriation of senior executives often follows a well-established pattern that is, frankly, no

fun for anybody. Initially, the husband is sent ahead to get his feet under the table; he lives for several months in a serviced apartment, not getting much exercise and eating take-away food because he doesn’t have time to shop. He travels a lot and when he isn’t travelling he puts in long hours in the office to try and get up to

speed. He has no social life because he doesn’t know anyone and his partner isn’t there to build one for him.

His wife or partner, meanwhile, has been left behind to pack up the house, organise the sale of unnecessary things, manage the tears and anxiety of the teenagers who feel their life is over or the toddlers who miss their dad – all while getting everyone to school on time and a meal on the table every night.

A draining warm up

Is this really the best footing on which to start a new and highly demanding assignment? It seems like asking someone to warm up with a 20km jog before they tackle the full marathon. Both partners can become physically and emotionally drained and things are only marginally better when the trailing partner arrives in the new destination. The husband continues to put in long hours, either at the home office or another regional office and has the on-going challenges of the new role. The other partner, meanwhile, does everything required to build and feather a new nest, to settle the children into new





schools, build a new social life for themselves and – if time allows – look after his or her own sanity.

‘Expat failure rate’ refers to an incomplete or an ineffective assignment. The unhappiness of the partner and/or family is still the biggest reason and considering the demands that are made, it is not hard to see why. Accompanying partners give up their friends and family, their place in their community and sometimes a house and garden which they have spent years making their own. Often, they have also put their own career on hold in order to support their partner and in the new destination their own qualifications may not be recog-

nised, there may not be suitable childcare available, they may only be able to work on local terms or maybe not at all.

Renee is a South African woman I worked with a few years ago, who had run a successful dental practice there for 16 years before moving to Australia. She had to pass four local exams in order to practice in the new country and the exams took place once a year. In 2011, she passed B, C and D but failed A. In 2012, she passed A, B & D but failed C. Her money and her patience were exhausted and from her point of view, the move was a disaster. “What’s in it for me?” she asked, “I’ve lost all my staff, my family, my friends, my self-

respect, my professional pride, my status in the community – I gave it all up for my husband and I’ve practically lost him too, as he travels constantly and is too tired to go anywhere or meet anyone when he does get home.”

The truth, but not the whole truth

Renee’s story is not unusual; I have worked with dozens of women (and a few men) who are bitterly disappointed with their side of the expatriate deal, and I believe that organisations are not always fully open about the challenges that lie ahead. The focus is too much on the talent and the skill set and not enough on the whole person and the people that accompany them. Many of my clients speak of being completely unprepared for the emotional rollercoaster they found themselves on, the isolation due to language difficulties, their loss of self-esteem, and the loneliness and boredom they endured. The “sales pitch” is all about the benefits – the money, the maid, the flights home, the subsidised rent, the club membership – and includes nothing about the nasty side effects that might be experienced.

Potential expats are often treated to a familiarisation trip, in which the couple is treated to a five-star lifestyle for a few days, often completely unlike what they will be able to afford when they actually move. This is almost unethical as there is a picture on the packet that doesn’t match what is in the packet. Time would be far better spent meeting a range of people who live in the new country already and learn about their real lives, as well as discuss the pros and the cons of the location with people who aren’t looking to sell them something. On the basis of that information, some pre-departure evaluation of their suitability for work in a different culture as well as an honest look at their relationship, potential expats can make a better-informed decision and companies can save themselves a fortune.

According to www.expatsresearch.com: “99 percent of trailing spouses say a ‘strong and stable marriage’ is the number one factor contributing to assignment success”, but many expats go on assignment hoping to prop up an already struggling marriage. Given the challenges and demands the couple will face, how safe an investment can this be? The ‘head in the sand’ approach seems to be the preferred one, however. According to an article in *The Wall Street Journal*: “Hard facts and statistics about expat divorce rates are sur-



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prisingly hard to come by. 'This is no coincidence,' says Mila Lazarova, a professor of international business at Canada's Simon Fraser University, who specializes in expatriate management. 'The less companies know, the better, so they never ask,' says Dr Lazarova."

Short-term gains, long-term losses

Such short-term thinking and such a one-eyed view cannot be profitable in the long run for anyone involved. The company potentially loses huge amounts of money (an expat assignment typically costs three times a salary over a two-year period), not to mention the impact of an unhappy employee on colleagues and clients. For the employee, careers are derailed and relationships are potentially damaged irretrievably.

What then can be done to improve the situation? Having worked with expatriates from many different countries, at both junior and senior levels, there are a number of changes I would like to see, starting with getting rid of the derogatory term "trailing spouse" and the thinking behind it. Today's partners are not just people who "pay, pack and follow" and they are not all spouses; the term "accompanying partner" is eminently more respectful and fitting. Partners are 50 percent of this expensive experiment and if they are not happy, the assignment will not last, no matter how perfect a hire it may be for the organisation.

I also believe that pre-departure assessment for suitability should be mandatory, as should cross-cultural training, as the sin-

gle biggest issue is that people don't know what they don't know. As one HR Director wrote to me: "I know the value of cultural briefings and we used to provide them a number of years ago. Unfortunately, we virtually had to drag the employee kicking and screaming to attend and we gave up when around 80 percent of participants would cancel the day before – so the cost was still incurred...[however], over the years, those that have attended all spoke very highly of the value they got from it." Why then not make it mandatory, in the same way that health and safety briefings are? Research from Cigna Global shows that cross-cultural training made expatriates three times more likely to rate their overseas assignment favourably.

Finally, I believe that the organisation has a duty of care to provide a "warts and all" picture of the new life, not a glossy brochure one. You may get more people into the starting gate by doing only the latter, but how many of them will stay the distance? Training needs to support both the employee and the partner as well as address not only the differences in business culture but also the realities of expat life.

These are small and relatively inexpensive changes that can be made to current global mobility programs and which I believe would deliver great benefits to both the employer and the expatriate family. The current thinking seems to be like spending a fortune on a bicycle, but then "saving" money by not buying a padlock – a truly false economy, as anyone who owns a bicycle could tell you.



Patti McCarthy is the author of *Cultural Chemistry: Simple Strategies for Bridging Cultural Gaps*. The book has many 5 star reviews on Amazon and is described as "the new cross-cultural classic" and "a must have for business".

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