FAMILY KEYS TO EXPAT SUCCESS

IS YOUR HR TEAM
READY TO RELOCATE?

CORPORATE VS. SUPPLIER
IS THE GRASS GREENER?

THE NEW
PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT
I first met Laura, a 35-year-old British national, three years ago at a cross-cultural training program that I was delivering to help her adapt to life as an “accompanying spouse” in Singapore. She had come with her husband, who was on an assignment as the regional head of a well-known multinational corporation.

At the time, Laura was living an upper-class lifestyle as an expat wife in a new home in an exclusive neighborhood. Amenities included the use of a private swimming pool, corporate-funded private schooling for their child, and a live-in maid who tended to the family’s every need.

Laura readily acknowledged that she was leading a privileged life—one that was quite different from her previous modest lifestyle in the U.K. Despite this, however, she was adamant that she would gladly swap all the trappings of her new existence for her previous life. Laura was an expat spouse in crisis.

Laura’s story is not unusual. Relocation surveys consistently indicate that despite all the logistical investment that organizations make to try to support relocating families, the No. 1 reason for assignment failure is the family’s inability to adjust. In fact, Cartus’ research shows that 10 to 30 percent of international assignments end in failure. “Family or personal circumstances” is named as the top reason for rejecting an assignment by 76 percent of respondents to Cartus’ “2014 Global Mobility Policy & Practices Survey.”

The emotional well-being and adaptation of the spouse/partner and children are critical to ensuring assignment success, but these factors are sadly often underestimated by corporate sponsors who may not recognize that the failure of an assignee’s accompanying family members to flourish on assignment is very much the organization’s problem. Assignment success depends on a number of key factors, including the ability of the assignee and their whole family not only to survive the assignment, but also to adjust to it and thrive on it. It is rarely possible for an assignee to be fully committed to a new role when family members are struggling.

Providing adequate support helps accompanying spouses/partners not only survive, but thrive on assignment

By Jenny Castelino
FAMILY STRESSORS

To address these challenges effectively, business heads, human resources departments, and mobility managers need to be able to recognize and understand the main stressors and challenges faced by the accompanying family members. The following scenarios are among those most frequently cited by accompanying spouses as the most painful.

‘ARRIVED KICKING AND SCREAMING!’
Organizations often assume an employee’s acceptance of an assignment automatically indicates that the entire family is on board with the decision. This may not be true. The employee may have accepted the assignment in an effort to obtain international experience for career development, or even because they felt that they had little choice. It may not necessarily reflect any buy-in or enthusiasm from other family members, including their life partner. Cartus’ candidate assessment and cross-cultural training programs sometimes reveal substantial tensions between the assignee and their partner—tensions that have been simmering below the surface and then boil over during the session. Some assignees reveal that even though they were aware of their spouse/partner’s unhappiness about the assignment, they never discussed it with their employer for fear of appearing indecisive!

Some partners are ambivalent about the move, whereas others may be highly resistant and arrive at the assignment destination “kicking and screaming.” Such attitudes might be related to their own career aspirations in the home location, close ties with family members who have been left behind, or simply a reluctance to uproot their previously stable lives.

THE INVISIBLE HALF: LOSS OF SELF-ESTEEM
A common challenge expressed by accompanying spouses is the unexpected loss of identity and self-worth. At home, they felt that their professional and personal contributions were valued by their employers, colleagues, family members, and friends; this is no longer the case in the new location. Another big factor contributing to loss of self-esteem is the perceived shift in control or power between the assignee and spouse/partner. Natasha, an accompanying partner, complains that her husband had changed beyond recognition and no longer showed her the same respect as he had when they were at home in the U.S. “We were a team there,” she says, “but now that he has been promoted to a new position in China and has become the primary breadwinner, he has acquired a huge ego. I feel like I have lost my husband and acquired a boss. He gets angry when I tell him that I am finding it challenging, because in his mind I have such an easy life with this huge house, a maid, etc. What he doesn’t realize is that I feel like a bird in a gilded cage. The cage is beautiful and expensive, but it is a cage nonetheless.”

This issue can be exacerbated by the increased reliance a spouse may suddenly have on the assignee from a variety of perspectives, including financial—especially if the spouse/partner previously had an independent source of income but is now dependent on the assignee financially.

Erosion of self-worth is compounded by the fact that in many locations around the world, accompanying partners are unable to contribute basic functions such as opening a bank account or setting up telecommunications without the working partner/spouse being present. Everyday tasks—obtaining a handyman, finding a good doctor—can also become a logistical nightmare when one does not know how to make these things happen or, worse, cannot speak the language.

MARITAL STRIFE
Rather than strengthening the relationship, assignments may exacerbate existing weaknesses. Assignees to Asia frequently discover that they have acquired regional responsibilities that require them to travel constantly. Regional travel also frequently necessitates after-work entertainment. This nomadic lifestyle, combined with a constant separation from the family, can result in emotional detachment—never a positive development in any relationship.

DUAL-CAREER DILEMMAS
Deciding whether to accompany a partner or spouse on assignment can be very difficult, especially for partners who already have established careers of their own. Most do not have careers that are “portable,” and in many cases employment restrictions in the host location make it challenging for them to find any paid employment.

In a recent survey by the Permits Foundation, 66 percent of employers surveyed reported that dual-career and partner issues are becoming more important to their organizations, and 70 percent
felt their organization should do more to support employees’ dual-career concerns.

The delay or potentially even abandonment of one’s own career aspirations can damage both self-confidence and sense of purpose in these individuals. It is easy to feel that one’s aspirations and self-worth have been relegated to the back burner, perhaps for an indeterminate period.

Women who have long supported themselves financially may also struggle with the idea that they will no longer have their own income. As one expatriate partner mused, “I hate the feeling that he has to give me a monthly allowance to run the house. It makes me doubt my self-worth—especially when he questions the purchases that I have made.”

The increasing number of male accompanying spouses may find it even more challenging than their female counterparts. Not only is the spousal support network in most countries geared more toward females, but these individuals often also comment that they feel judged by men and women alike due to traditional perceptions related to gender roles.

LONELINESS, ISOLATION, AND LACK OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT
Leaving loved ones behind is difficult for most expats and their families. The guilt of being separated from family members, especially siblings or aging parents, can exacerbate this, especially in cultures where filial responsibility is a core value.

Regardless of background, most of us thrive in an environment where we have meaningful relationships and an established support network of family and friends. But developing these can take a long time—a commodity that is in short supply on a one- or two-year assignment.

HR managers need to be aware that the transition can be considerably easier for the assignee, who has the familiarity of a workplace and daily interaction with colleagues, than for the spouse/partner, who has to establish a life, relationships, and a sense of purpose—on their own, from scratch.

Families can also feel vulnerable when a life-changing event—such as the death of a parent at home or the birth of a child at the host location—occurs during an assignment. I was pregnant when I first moved to Singapore 18 years ago. Experiencing pregnancy and labor—and subsequently, taking on the role of new mother—without the support of family was challenging, to say the least. I had no one locally with whom I could share my concerns or questions. I considered myself lucky because I was working at the time, but I can appreciate the sense of isolation and fear that may arise when a meaningful support network is nonexistent.

STRUGGLING KIDS
Children are greatly affected by a relocation, yet they usually have no say in the matter. It is pretty well guaranteed that if a child or teenager is suffering a lot of angst related to a move, the person who is going to be shouldering that guilt and pain will be the accompanying spouse.

Watching your child struggle with the establishment of a new home and deal with a new school, new friends, and new routines can be excruciating for the spouse/partner at home who has to deal with the fallout. Many complain that they feel powerless to prevent the pain that their child is experiencing.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT
What, then, should HR and mobility practitioners take away from the preceding information? I hope it will encourage them to be more understanding
and empathetic when determining the support services to be provided to assignees who are relocating with family members. In particular, they should consider the following:

**MONEY ISN’T EVERYTHING**

Many HR and mobility managers wrongly assume that the happiness of expats and their families will be assured as long as the financial carrot is enticing enough. Of course, financial gain is important to prospective assignees and their families and may indeed be a weighty factor in the decision-making process, but it most certainly is not the only factor, nor does it guarantee assignment success.

Business heads and HR and mobility executives need to invest time in understanding the motivations of both the assignee and the spouse in undertaking the assignment. Additionally, an in-depth discussion related to their short-/long-term career and personal lifetime aspirations provides valuable insight into the psychological contract each of the parties is seeking to fulfill. Some of these may be stated explicitly, but others, such as the personal expectations of the spouse/partner, are seldom discussed.

At the top of the list of breaches of this psychological contract that can derail an assignment is being given inaccurate information concerning employment opportunities for the spouse/partner in the host location. Businesses are well-advised to be certain they understand the primary motivations and expectations of a prospective assignee and their spouse/partner in accepting the assignment, and advising them appropriately if their expectations are unrealistic.

**CHANGING ASSIGNEE PROFILES CALL FOR NEW APPROACHES**

The profile of a typical assignee has changed dramatically over the past 30 years. Prior to that, expatriation was uncommon in most organizations, but where it did exist, many participants were middle-aged Western males who were handsomely rewarded for the “inconvenience” of accepting a typical two-year assignment, at the end of which they were repatriated to their home location. Spouses—that is, women—were homemakers who were happy to support their husbands’ careers.

In contrast, the modern-day assignee may be of any nationality and from any age group. They are male or female, perhaps married or perhaps looking to relocate with a partner to whom they are not legally married. Frequently, the partner/spouse is also likely to have an established career in the home location that they will now be giving up. To complicate things further, nowadays, assignees may not be offered the large relocation benefits packages of yesteryear, and they could well be required to travel unrelentingly. Finally, they may be expected to undertake further assignments immediately after the initial one, with no guarantee of when they will be repatriated or with no clear picture of the role they will assume upon their return home.

**BEST PRACTICES IN RELOCATING FAMILIES**

When considering this rapidly changing mobility landscape, it is not surprising that new stresses and challenges are being experienced by the current crop of assignees and their families, and it’s apparent that HR and mobility management need to adopt a new approach. Organizations should consider some of the following factors when designing an effective support package:

**ARE WE SENDING THE RIGHT PEOPLE?**

Organizations currently focus on the technical/leadership competencies required in the host location and seek to match them with those of prospective candidates; however, it would be wise to extend the competency match to family members. Mobility managers should also ask themselves: “Does the candidate we have in mind and their accompanying partner/family have the attitude, aptitude, and cultural dexterity required to make this assignment successful?”

A key factor here is that the perception of the “right” candidate is no longer limited to the assignee alone but to their accompanying spouse and family members as well.

One way to determine this is by using a formal candidate assessment program. An effective solution should offer an impartial perspective and enable both the corporation and the assignee/spouse to assess the suitability of the participants for this particular assignment and to identify any critical risks that may affect their success. Including the spouse as an integral part of this assessment process encourages an open discussion between the participants regarding their respective motivations.
for accepting the assignment and the expectations and concerns each has of the other and of the assignment itself.

If the assignee’s skills are absolutely needed in the host location but the employer sees potential challenges in relocating the family, then the company could consider a shorter assignment or a split-family policy.

**COMPREHENSIVE DESTINATION SERVICES**

Organizations need to ensure that assignees and their spouses are prepared for their prospective relocation and that any anxiety related to their key priorities is addressed as early as possible in the decision-making cycle.

Comprehensive destination services support, including a pre-move orientation trip, homefinding, and school search support, are key steps in this process. Outsourcing this process to an experienced resource who is familiar with local markets and best practices is paramount.

In countries where ongoing tenancy management is locally challenging, it is advisable that this also be outsourced so that all ongoing property issues are managed in a timely fashion by local resources who speak the language—thereby alleviating a potentially high level of stress for the spouse and the assignee.

**BRIDGING THE CULTURAL DIVIDE**

Culture shock is a huge challenge for assignees and partners. Stripped of all familiar social, behavioral, and communication cues and norms, family members may struggle to adapt to working and living in the new location. It makes sense to equip individuals with the knowledge and skills required to recognize and appropriately react to the cultural communication style in the host location.

A key tool in providing this support is customized cross-cultural training that addresses the specific needs, concerns, and priorities of the participants in a confidential setting. An effective program will provide participants with the confidence, skills, and knowledge to navigate cross-cultural differences while also developing robust coping skills.

Language acquisition is a key determinant of assignment success in many locations. Basic language skills provide the individual with a sense of achievement and, most important, a level of independence. Language training for family members is therefore very important. If possible, the family should be given an opportunity to begin language lessons pre-departure and then continue in the host locale.

**CAREERS MATTER!**

Organizations are well-advised to familiarize themselves with the work aspirations of accompanying spouses vis-à-vis the assignment period. Candid, up-to-date information on available and legal options for paid employment should be made available to the assignee and spouse before the final decision to relocate has been made. Organizations should familiarize themselves with the important work of the Permits Foundation. This independent nonprofit organization campaigns globally to improve work permit regulations and make it easier for partners of expatriate staff to gain employment during an international assignment. Since the foundation began its work in 2001, 30 countries have allowed spouses to work, and there are clear signs of a growing trend to recognize family needs of all kinds.

**A PERSONALIZED APPROACH**

By looking through the eyes of the accompanying partner/spouse, HR and mobility managers can gain valuable insights into individuals’ priorities and needs. A personalized approach to this support is likely to result in happier spouses and an increase in successful, productive expatriate assignments. 

Jenny Castelino is director, Cartus APAC intercultural and language solutions. She can be reached by email at jenny.castelino@cartus.com.