

HR's Role in Making Families Feel Safe

By: Robin Pascoe

In locations where schools close because of terrorist-related threats and families face additional challenges, not all companies are making their employees feel secure. Robin Pascoe reports.

Looking after the needs of families of transferring employees can be difficult in the best of times for global companies. But for human resource practitioners managing international assignees and their dependents, these early years of the 21st century have been particularly challenging.

In some postings, security-related issues have been forced to the top of the list. Indonesia and Venezuela immediately spring to mind as two places where HR has recently had its hands full.

"In Indonesia, companies were able to plan for civil unrest to a great extent. The successful evacuations from Jakarta in 1998 proved that companies can take care of their people in those contained and more predictable situations," believes Valerie Scane, an accompanying spouse in Indonesia whose husband works for the energy company ConocoPhillips.

Her children were taken out of an international school in Jakarta that was forced to close for two weeks in the aftermath of the Bali bombing and other threats.

"We still have a degree of civil unrest, but our concern is now the unpredictable nature of terrorism, with the Bali bombing being a good example. Governments and companies can't plan as well for the unpredictable, leaving expatriates feeling more exposed," Scane says.

"After a slow start, ConocoPhillips Indonesia has really come through on this," she reports. "Like everyone else, they were caught by surprise by the Bali bombing, and their initial communications and actions weren't as effective as they could have been."

"However, they admitted their mistakes and moved on. Now the spouses and employees get e-mail updates, we all have pagers and phones so we can be contacted quickly. Partners are invited into town hall security meetings and the company has supported such things as having the security firm come out and show parents how to check school buses for bombs."

"They were also one of the first of the oil companies to lay out a series of options for employees to manage the school closing crisis. These options ranged from provisions for home schooling (which already existed but were brought to our attention), to having the family move to Singapore and flying the employee out for weekends, to having the family move home so the employee would go on single status and allowances would be recalculated so the two households would not be financially hit too hard."

"None of the options are easy, but the feeling that the company is handing back some control over our lives is amazingly therapeutic."

Contrast that story with another Jakarta-based spouse and mother who wishes to remain anonymous.

“Within my husband’s firm, there was an acknowledgment that there was concern, but ‘life goes on.’ There is currently nothing planned and I have no knowledge of support or security help for us personally,” she says. “I’ve not heard of any crisis plans and I think we will be very much on our own if we decide to depart.”

Although this spouse acknowledges that many men seem to have the attitude of “just get on with things”, she believes the issue goes deeper.

“I wonder if it’s because the women here in their daytime life have to curtail things far more than men who are busy at the office, oblivious to many of the changes happening in the community,” she says, adding that women probably have more time to worry about the children also as they are the major caregivers with workaholic husbands.

Companies and organisations should keep in mind that helping families feel safer serves their bottom line interests, according to the 2002 Global Expatriate Study conducted by Cigna International Expatriate Benefits, the National Foreign Trade Council (NFTC) in the US, and WorldatWork, a compensation and benefits association based in Arizona.

The findings, based on more than half of the study’s 709 respondents — 39 percent of which are working in the EU, and all of whom are employees as no spouses were interviewed according to the NFTC — noted that expatriates who believe they are not getting enough information about safety issues have less peace of mind and feel less productive.

It has certainly been proven by many expatriate researchers that a husband whose wife is at home going out of her mind with worry — whether it’s over fear of the safety of her children or any other of the challenges the accompanying spouse faces — will not be allowing her partner to get much work done at the office.

A recently evacuated spouse from Caracas, Venezuela, offers even more advice for HR looking for ways to help their expatriates in difficult postings. This spouse noted that while the beginning of her family’s evacuation was initially handled with both professionalism and kindness by her husband’s organisation, the costs — emotional and financial — quickly started to add up.

Certain necessities and actions could be taken she believes, in order to mitigate the loneliness and expense of suddenly being a two-household family. These include:

- Providing necessities like computers (for e-mail), access to cars, school testing services so that evacuated children can be placed properly in schools, as well as access to doctors and dentists who will make room in busy practices to see them.
- Reaching out to the evacuated families and following up on their welfare instead of waiting for them to call the organisation seeking help.
- Informing them of their options.
- Giving them the tools to operate independently, but stay near.

An evacuation is a hardship for a family, according to the spouse forced to leave her husband behind in Caracas.

“It’s real, personal and utterly outside of their control,” she says.

“Families are counting on the company to help.”

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