

## Mobility is a Work-Life Challenge

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**By: Robin Pascoe**

International HR managers need to start paying serious attention to the work-life balance challenges of their global managers as they are impacting on effectiveness and employee retention among other long term business goals of companies. Whether on long or short term assignments or even on extended business travel, managers themselves say they want more assistance from their employers with work-life balance issues while on assignment.

Longer working hours, late night phone calls from headquarters many time zones away, and an unhappy spouse who has given up her/his career to support the manager are just a few of the challenges now combining with the already well-known adjustment factors of culture shock, working in a new overseas office, and extensive regional travel to wreak havoc with the work-life balance of the modern day expatriate manager working in a 24/7 global economy.

So it was only a matter of time before something clicked: work-life balance, a hot button issue now in the domestic sphere of work, is finally being acknowledged—and researched—as a challenge for expatriates.

“A lot of expat research focuses on the importance of family adjustment for overall expatriate adjustment and implicitly talking about what research refers to as ‘personal life (or family) interference with work’,” reports Dr. Mila Lazarova, a business professor at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.

Dr. Lazarova has co-authored a chapter entitled “Work-Life Balance and the Effective Management of Global Assignees” in a new book *Work and Family: An International Research Perspective* edited by Dr. Steve Poelmans of the International Center of Work and Family at IESE Business School in Barcelona.

“What research is not talking about is the interference of personal life with personal life,” says Dr. Lazarova. “The concept may sound a little ridiculous in the domestic context where people exist in bubble rarely interacting with others. But is very much relevant in the expatriate context where the personal lives of all family members are very much inter-related.”

“Overseas, family members rely on each other a lot more for support. An unhappy trailing spouse or child affects much more than the ‘work’ of expatriates. Tension in the family may have a negative impact on all aspects of the life of the expatriate,” she believes.

Given that work-related global relocation permeates every aspect of an employee's life, it is important to better understand the ways in which organizations can help encourage work-life balance among their global assignees, according to Dr. Lazarova's research.

### **Why now?**

Besides the obvious advancements in technology which allow for those late night phone calls and constant barrage of e-mails or text messages which need to be answered immediately, changing demographics—there are simply more women in the workforce including more female expatriate managers—have pushed the work-life balance issue to the forefront. But as well, those longer working hours for expatriates mean more stress not just for the manager but also for the members of their families.

Family is directly related to daily living adjustment, family adjustment and burnout according to the “2004 Emerging Trends in Global Mobility: The Assignee Perspective” conducted by Cendant Mobility in conjunction with the Atkinson Graduate School of Management at Willamette University in the U.S. Indeed, burnout was reported in the study in its five top assignment challenges as cited by employee respondents. Notably, burnout was viewed as a challenge regardless of whether the assignment was long or short term.

It’s no wonder then that a 2002 Global Expatriate Study sponsored by CIGNA International Expatriate Benefits, the National Foreign Trade Council, and WorldatWork reported that expatriates would appreciate more assistance from their employer with work-life balance issues while working abroad. Seventy-five per cent agreed that international assignments were difficult on dual-career families.

That thorny issue of ‘spousal reluctance to relocate’ (the number one reason an assignment is refused) has left recruiters shaking their heads as they try to fill overseas positions.

Says Dr. Lazarova: “In the past, it was a given that if one’s career demanded it, the family moved. This is no longer the case unless companies balance the scale somehow. They are discovering that unless they address work-life challenges, they’ll have a serious staffing problem on their hands.”

Given what a variety of recent surveys have reported, employers should consider trying to:

- ensure the family goes through a pre-assignment self-assessment process to promote accurate self-knowledge about the capacity to face assignment challenges;
- provide pre-assignment preparation focused on building support and communication within the family unit since this is the primary resource employees will turn to when dealing with an assignment’s challenges; and,
- provide an Employee Assistance Program tailored to meet the needs of international assignments.

To coincide with the realization that challenges of work-life balance affect expatriate managers, the International Center of Work and Family, based at the IESE Business School in Barcelona is hosting an inaugural conference on the subject in July.

The “International Research on Work and Family: From Policy to Practice” conference will gather together academics, policy makers and leaders in the industry to discuss theories and practices of work-family issues. One of the four themes of the meeting will be work-family conflict and resolution among expatriates and their families.

According to organizer Dr. Steve Poelmans, Assistant Professor of Managing People and Organizations at IESE Business School and the editor of the book referenced earlier, expats are a logical choice for study in the work-family sphere.

“Expats probably experience some of the most elevated levels of work-family conflict,” says Dr. Poelmans. “At the same time that they are exposed to very challenging demands—which is the stress of change—they are being cut off from important resources such as family support, familiarity with childcare and schooling facilities.”

The conference will merge academics with real-world practitioners. Says Dr. Poelmans: “Being a business school, we can’t afford to be theoretical. We need to translate all concepts to concrete decision making criteria and ways of dealing with the issue.”

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