

Supporting the Family During Short-term Assignments

By: Robin Pascoe

If you think short-term assignments solve all the family-related issues of other assignment types, you are far from right. Robin Pascoe explains why families of short-term assignees need more support.

Several key surveys conducted in the past two years — from international relocation companies, trade organisations and human resource consultancies — all indicate that more and more companies are using short-term global assignments of up to a year's duration.

The reasons cited for this shift away from longer-term expatriation include cost-effectiveness, a better way to meet the needs of a client, and more significantly, the fact that it's harder to find employees willing to move overseas assignments due to family considerations.

But while the short-term relocation may sound like the perfect answer to HR staffing problems, it's not without its challenges to the family, according to Beverly Roman, Publisher of BR Anchor Publishing and President of Families in Global Transition, which held its annual conference in early October in Indianapolis, USA.

"Along with the practical challenges facing an employee such as living accommodations and getting up to speed quickly in a different culture, there are significant hazards waiting for the family left behind," reports Roman.

"Discontentment can be high for an employee living without family and the support of the spouse to help the employee settle in. There will also be increased travel allowances to help couples cope with the increased strain on the at-home family situation," she says.

In general, companies still focus only on the employee, according to HR consultant and former Caltex HR practitioner Carrie Shearer. For instance, most of those surveys conducted about the nature of short-term assignments were done only with the employee, without any feedback or input from the spouse.

"Organisational thinking is that a short-term assignment avoids family disruption since the spouse can keep her job and the children remain in the same school, so what support do they need?" asks Shearer.

Plenty — which became evident in a lively workshop at the Families in Global Transition conference entitled: "The Changing Face of Corporate Expatriation: Serving Families on Short-Term Assignments."

Since little or nothing has been researched or reported on the impact of the short-term assignment on the family, it was natural that the only North American-based conference to focus on family mobility issues would address these challenges.

In a session facilitated by Canadian cross-cultural trainers Zelda Fedder and Leonore Clauss, participants were asked to identify family needs that typically are not considered in the short-term assignment package.

Most companies and organisations do factor in travel allowances and other financial benefits as they relate to salary and benefits as part of the deal. But they overlook services the spouse — left alone to cope with children, often in a strange city if the family recently moved —desperately need. High on the compensation list are babysitters, household help, plus translation services, transportation assistance, and increased security measures.

“We had one woman with three children under the age of 5 who had just moved to Dallas when her husband was sent away for five months,” reports Shearer. “We paid for a babysitter so she could go to the supermarket as well as organised a round robin of people willing to pick her up for a cup of coffee, watch the children so she could just think, or just to bring over dinner once in a while so she wasn’t alone with tiny tots all the time.”

Says Margaret, a participant in the workshop and a US State Department spouse whose husband is on a temporary one year assignment without her: “I don’t think I would have agreed to the idea of an assignment apart from each other if my children were younger and still at home.”

The couple communicate daily by e-mail, and Margaret has visited her husband at his assignment location so she can picture his day-to-day life. These are both highly recommended ways of keeping the family together during the separation.

“But we both feel the disconnection of the assignment in the evenings and on weekends. I also worry this form of an assignment may ultimately create health problems for my husband,” she says.

“He typically works longer hours and weekends because there’s no one at home. He doesn’t like going home to an empty house. I’ve had to put pressure on him to relax and go on trips at the weekends. Like most wives, I’ve always had the role of ‘cruise director’ in our family. Without me there, I do see the potential for health issues which should not be taken lightly.”

So what can HR do besides acknowledge the family challenges of the short-term assignment?

“Go on a temporary assignment,” says Shearer, and she’s not kidding.

“I think if some of the HR people had to experience some of what they do to expats, they might change their tune. And not a business trip, since too many HR folks think since they spent two weeks living in a hotel (usually three- or four-star) with a car and driver that they know what it’s like to live somewhere.”

“If HR began thinking in terms of their own lives and the changes that would be necessary if they or their spouse were to leave for a period of time, they would discover the golden rule [‘Do unto others...’] is still the best policy.”

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