

There has never been a better time to be an expat

By: Robin Pascoe

On the many speaking tours she has made in over twenty years of covering the 'global living beat', author Robin Pascoe says she is invariably asked the same questions over and over again by both expatriate families and the managers who oversee their relocations. But she reports that one question in particular stands out: Have things changed at all in the way organizations support moveable families?

It doesn't seem to matter if I'm lecturing to rotational families living in Tokyo, Santiago, London, or Jerusalem. I always chuckle when I hear that perennial question.

It usually comes soon after the other universal standard asked by expatriate parents: when should we tell our children we're moving again?

My audiences always look perplexed, though, when my response to their question about change goes something like this:

"Well, that all depends. What's the price of oil today?" Then, to add further confusion for the audience, in recent months I've added another query, "What's the US dollar worth today?"

Those two questions, combined with my many years of assisting expatriates to succeed and thrive in their overseas adventures, allow me to reflect not only on what has changed, but more critically, what has not changed for families on the move.

I'll explain why I use them as my measure in a moment. First, allow me to stress this good news which all of my own research, writing and travel has underscored for me: It has never been a better time to be an expat.

Ironically, I often have to work really hard to make my case for that. For example, when I'm facing audiences worried about security issues (be it health-related or terrorism) I have to remind them that in the 'old days' expats died all the time from lack of good drinking water, nasty mosquitoes, strange local diseases and bad health care.

Expats have never been healthier or safer, I tell people, and then suggest they turn off their television sets if they want to stop worrying about terrorists.

Bad things always happened in the past: we just didn't know about it within minutes of an event, our fears enhanced by graphic images repeated again and again just to make sure we're good and terrified.

Thanks to the Internet, expatriates now go out to a new posting more informed than their predecessors about their host cultures; they can learn new languages, make new friends before arrival, see pictures of new schools and homes.

They can find a chat group, a playgroup, or a mentor in the time it takes to google a new place. Accompanying partners can start home-based businesses, telecommute to old jobs, or snag consulting contracts.

Raising children abroad has also become easier because of websites and in-country counseling services which help parents make informed choices about schools, the primary concern for any expatriate family.

Mobile phones allow pick-up times after activities to be carried off smoothly and parents can keep a closer eye on their children thanks to digital technology which does everything but implant them with a GPS chip, although some newer models of phones now have them.

And support remains a critical ingredient for family and assignment success, which is why I decided recently to conduct my own survey Family Matters! (see sidebar) to hear how families themselves feel about it all.

What have not changed in my experience, are attitudes towards financing organizational support for the mobile family. The corporate jet still flies high while many families and accompanying spouses spiral into depression, substance abuse, and divorce.

Naturally, personal responsibility must always be front and center, but too many nasty situations I've seen have been the direct result of company indifference.

I use the price of oil or the exchange rate on the US dollar as my shorthand codes for the amount of money which will be allotted to relocation support for families. If oil is up by the barrel, everyone is getting pre-departure training and language lessons.

Dollar down? That means cross-cultural training, a soft issue that costs money instead of generating it for a company, is the first item to be cut from mobility budgets. I've seen training offered and then taken away; housing allowances up, then down and then up again; language proficiency stressed as a plus and encouraged with allotments than taken away again.

I have seen it all come, go, come back again and go away yet again. Ask me about the price of oil tomorrow and I'll probably have yet another answer.

In short, from the privileged position I've had to observe and report on trends in global, rotational-style living, while things may have improved at certain points, nothing has remained changed for long and the constant which never seems to change is that money spent on family support is not considered money well-spent despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Short term, reactive, attitudes prevail as the norm. Companies who do right by their families are the exception, not the rule. Expats I meet in the field say they now have the lowest of expectations of their organizations.

Broken promises (especially in the areas of spousal support) have led to broken marriages; children face gaps in their education if comprehensive management of their school years is not taken into account by the powers-that-be; and organizations are working many of their employees into early disability pensions as work-life balance in the global economy remains ephemeral as a goal and ignored, or worse, denied, as a challenge.

The growing addiction to 24/7 accessibility through incessant and unhealthy BlackBerry use doesn't seem to be setting off alarm bells anywhere either. Expats have had to become more self-sufficient which isn't necessarily a bad thing if not for the fact that all the industry surveys report almost 80% of postings fail because of the family's inability to adjust.

Lack of support for the relocation is right up there as a reason for that failure. It is a testament to the resilience, flexibility, grace, and often downright courage of many expatriates and their families that they succeed in spite of the non-existence of any kind of support they receive and the lack of attention that, sadly, continues to be paid to their unique challenges.

If anyone has any ideas on how to change organizational attitudes, you know where to find me. I'm still out there, over twenty years later, trying to change hearts and minds.

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