

Turning Spousal Survey Data Into Policy

By: Robin Pascoe

Ask spouses what they want, and you'll be able to help them — and the expatriate employee — succeed. Robin Pascoe investigates why this essential connection doesn't happen as often as it should.

There are a number of surveys presently circulating that ask expatriate spouses to spend considerable time answering questions about their needs and challenges in relocation.

The surveys hope to link accompanying spousal dissatisfaction to bottom-line expenses of corporations that send couples abroad, only to have the spouse's unhappiness derail the assignment.

But can spousal survey data translate into concrete HR policy? Two international business researchers specializing in human resource development believe they not only can, but should.

"Expatriate policy can't be written without input from the spouse," says Yvonne McNulty, who initiated the Trailing Spouse survey (www.thetrailingspouse.com). "Whether that input comes from research, studies or surveys is irrelevant. The critical aspect is where the information is sourced."

If a company is writing a travel policy for its staff, it isn't going to get the information about what's needed in the policy from an airline, McNulty points out. "It will go to the staff managers first and determine air, hotel and car rental needs and then develop a policy according to budget and business relationships with the travel industry," she says.

"The same goes go for spousal policy. For instance, why ask a relocation company what the spousal needs are? They are just the facilitator. You need to ask the spouse first, then the employee. The information must be gathered at source so you can be sure you are asking the right people the right questions. Information gathered in surveys comes from the right source."

From the 80 respondents to McNulty's survey, she was able to determine that the internal environment (self-esteem, identity, career opportunities) is just as important to spouses as the external environment (housing, medical, schools for children). Yet, she says, expatriate policies typically only address the external environment, resulting in long-term losses for the company.

"It's easier to see and develop policy for the externals. They are more tangible and easier to implement," says McNulty. "They also create less 'exceptions', which will mean less headaches for HR in the short term. But the survey results definitely indicate where the holes exist in policy."

Tonya Foust Mead, president of Shared Knowledge, developed and disseminated the survey *An Identification and Ranking of Expatriate Spousal and Family Issues and Applicable Stress Reduction Methods Used to Prevent Early Withdrawals*.

Mead studied the perceptions of 88 expatriates and/or accompanying partners during an assignment abroad. The most striking observations to emerge from her survey directly related to corporate support policies including failure to acknowledge and/or address expatriate concerns, indecision, corporate wavering or lack of knowledge of international relocation issues. All of these issues exacerbated feelings of dissatisfaction and prompted the expatriate and family to terminate contracts prematurely.

“Human resource professionals acknowledge that the foundation of a sound corporate support policy is to motivate employees to act for the common good of the corporation,” says Mead.

However, she believes that one of the best ways to identify motivational factors within the expatriate work force is to survey accompanying partners, not the working employee.

“The input received from expatriate partners reflects the absolute consensus of the expatriate family. The expatriate partner will present a clear-glass window for corporations to peek in to what is not dimmed or shaded for want of privacy, ego concerns, or confidentiality. It is far more invaluable, accurate and honest in capturing the total family portrait than of the expatriate employee alone,” explains Mead.

“So not only will motivational factors be correctly identified by the accompanying partner,” she continues, “but HR can also determine the acceptable range of rewards, compensation or benefits required to change behaviour and identify to what extent behaviour may be modified.”

So what is preventing survey data from becoming policy?

“Unfortunately, the researcher and the policy maker are too often not the same person,” notes Mead. “Researchers might undertake a lot of surveys to publicize a particular problem with a specific community but the policy makers have within their independent power the right to choose whether to take appropriate action to make a positive change.”

McNulty offers another reason. “Most HR practitioners don’t have time to read or digest or develop and then implement a spouse policy based on surveys because expatriation is not their sole role in the company or they are too busy trying to get a general expat policy to succeed,” she says.

But international HR is equipped to write policies for spouses, McNulty points out.

“What’s still needed, besides more research, is a major shift in perception on their part that spousal issues are critical to the bottom line needs,” she says.

“When that finally happens, I believe they will start getting in touch with spouses and begin writing better policies.”

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