

# Lean Out: Engage With The Unseen Spouse To Reduce International Assignment Refusals

**Struggling with International Assignment Refusals? Would a change to your partner support policies make a difference?**

## Happy Spouse, Happy House

*'If the trailing spouse isn't happy, no-one is happy. Kids know instantly. If kids don't settle, trailing spouse unhappy, then the whole thing is a nightmare.'*

*Assignee comment*

No doubt many of us have heard the phrase, 'Happy wife, Happy life'. I prefer to think of it as 'Happy spouse, happy house'. Both acknowledge that we have lives outside of work, which are vitally important to our wellbeing. In Global Mobility management the importance of the 'unseen partner', is only going to grow.

**69% - of MNCs agreed that '- spouse/partner career issues will become more important for your company's ability to attract employees for an international assignment'.**

Most international assignees are in the tail end of *Generation X*, or the beginning of *Generation Y*. The Gen Xers are probably your managers, the talent you've been growing in-house, your leaders or future leaders. As a cohort they're '- highly educated, active, balanced, happy, and family-oriented', and likely, so are their spouses. And Generation Y demand '- more solutions for the whole family; quality jobs are sometimes mandatory for spouses to join the assignee'.

## Lean Out

Do we need to 'lean out', and look beyond just the employer/employee relationship to

also support the accompanying partner? Most international assignees are men, although the number of women going on international assignment has grown steadily in the last twenty years, now making up 20 percent of assignments. This rate is slightly higher in the healthcare and pharmaceutical industries.

The best way to support them and their male counterparts may be to directly support their partner.

## Direct Communication with the Accompanying Partner, so they don't become the Unseen Spouse

Relocation surveys consistently find that half the time an employee refuses an international assignment is because of family concerns and/or concerns about the accompanying partner's career. Some of the verbatim comments are interesting, 'Partner unwilling to give up careers, so unwilling to move'. There's an assumption here – that an international assignment has to mean the partner giving up their career. In many locations, this is true, but not all. Often the possible international assignment isn't truly discussed with the person who makes half the decision – the spouse/partner.

In the Expat Expert survey, two-thirds of accompanying partners say they did not have any direct contact with their partner's employer before or after relocation. In your company, what strategies do you have to engage with your employee's spouses? Are you confident they know what support is available to them and how they can access it?

*'The company claims to provide assistance with area orientation, setting up services, locating shopping facilities, language classes and driving orientation. None of this actually happened.'*

*Spouse comment*

Above all else, the Expat Expert report asked for '- a desperate need

for clarity of the conditions of the assignments, financial or otherwise. That can't be accomplished without an organisation having a complete picture of the moving experience for the family, which must then be followed up with an effective system for communicating the complete terms and conditions of the move abroad'.

## What are the policies that HR/Global Mobility managers say make a difference?

### 1. Supporting spouses to find a job in the host country.

This seems obvious, but it doesn't always happen. Financially it makes sense if you consider the larger picture, not just the short-term cost of paying for spousal career support. Let's take a look at the numbers: 7% of assignments end early<sup>1</sup> - that's a conservative estimate, others<sup>2</sup> put it as high as 50%.

**66% - of assignments that finish early, do so because of spousal concerns.**<sup>4</sup>

Any programme that reduces failures is likely to be good value for money. For example, each year, if you have 100 assignees away from home, it is likely 7 of them finish early and 4 of them return for family reasons. Each one of those returns costs you an additional \$250,000 (though it may be much more) = \$1m per year.

**\$250,000 - \$1.25m - Cost of early termination of an assignment.**<sup>3</sup>

How much do you currently spend on providing support services to an assignee's family and spouse? Is it more than \$1m per year? In your

company, do you know the percentage of assignments that fail for spouse or family reasons?

Above is an example of the cost of early returns, but how much do you lose when your talented staff refuse an assignment? If an inexperienced manager takes an international assignment because your first and second choice refuse – what does that cost you? Consider the costs in strategic, career and management objectives that occur when an assignee returns early – or simply doesn't do what they're meant to do.

## 2. Figure out your strategy and what you're measuring, or get someone else to do it.

Although it seems unrelated to assignee refusal rates, if you don't know which parts of your global mobility system are costing you money, then how can you cut costs? And let's face it, we're all conscious of our expenses. There's no better time to look at family support policies that make good financial sense.

Make sure the measures you use to determine value on assignment reflect the values and strategic objectives of your organisation.

## 3. Keeping employees informed that the support is there for them.

Yvonne McNulty, author of *Managing Expatriates: A Return on Investment Approach*, considers that '– the psychological contract is the biggest differentiator for organisations wanting to obtain a satisfactory eROI. What is a 'psychological contract'? It is the '– indirect, unwritten and often unspoken agreement between an employer and employee', the mutual understanding between the company and its staff, the way an employee feels they can, or can not, abide by the letter of the formal contract. It's the give and take, the flexibility, the understanding for the other person and their situation. 'Nothing shakes an expatriate's confidence and commitment like the feeling that his or her trust in the organisation has, in a breach of the psychological contract, been betrayed or ignored'.

## What helps decrease refusal rates? People

The irony is that it is not only money that makes the difference whether someone

accepts an international assignment or not. It is also about considering the social, cultural and career aspects of both the employee and the spouse. Two thirds of international assignees want assurances of a contact at the host country to help settle in. Some ideas for these are:

- A buddy system
- Welcoming events for all family members
- A commitment to everyone who arrives in their host-country that their immediate line manager meets and greets them
- A local concierge service when they arrive
- Introductions to host-country nationals before leaving the home country
- An on-going relationship with an expat coach who knows the host country.

The solution will vary with location and circumstances, but it is vital to provide human, caring support for everyone on assignment. Demonstrating the duty of care also helps to cement the psychological contract with the international assignee and those accompanying him or her on relocation.

**'Our employees feel more comfortable as soon as they know that our company also supports the partner/spouse (and children).'**

*Verbatim comment, Brookfields 2015 survey.*

Encouragingly, international couples want spouses involved in preliminary discussions about any relocation. Some organisations are making the effort to provide services in spousal/partner and family support, which assists the company to maintain a positive psychological contract with their employees.

When it comes to international assignments, the psychological contract extends to everyone who has to move, so the unseen spouse becomes a visible and considered part of the relocation.

Lean out to include the supporting partner and not only will you decrease your costs, you'll increase retention and international assignment acceptance rates.

### References

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3 "An Integrative View of International Experience", Takeuchi, R; Tesluk, Pe; Yun, Sh. *Academy of Management Journal.*, v. 48, (1), 2005, FEB, p. 85-100.

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