

Avoiding Relocation Meltdowns In The Wake Of Brexit

There's a reason it's called the nuclear family, and although it's actually about the nucleus as a core rather than the use of atomic weapons, the possibility of runaway and disastrous chain reactions in the high-pressure situation of an international relocation is very real. Get it wrong and you may have set in motion a chain of events that will have a negative impact on not only the employee's company, but also one may argue, more vitally, that of the employee's family.

Individuals are inherently flexible; such that younger employees have fewer responsibilities or ties to their home country and are therefore easier to relocate. However, as younger employees gain experience, skills, contacts and seniority, they are more than likely to have also gained a partner and a family. It is those employees that are key to new developments, fresh opportunities and taking advantage of changes in the political, financial and commercial landscape. As such, they are the most likely to be considered to first weather and then hopefully thrive in the settling of an international assignment.

Those assignments are on the rise – particularly in Europe. As shocked as many were by the results of the Brexit referendum, even the staunchest of Remainers has come to accept that Brexit is going to happen. And despite the uncertainty around what kind of Brexit we'll see, despite seemingly deadlocked negotiations, conflicting promises from Cabinet Ministers and tough talk on both sides of the Channel, companies too have accepted the seemingly inevitable. If the run-up to the referendum was characterised by corporate caution (for instance slowing recruitment) and a 'wait and see' attitude, the resultant market turmoil has now given way to a grim pragmatism.

London is the financial heart of Europe, so that pragmatism has had to assume a worst-case 'Hard Brexit' scenario: it's better to be over prepared than under prepared. Many big banks' senior spokespeople are talking about large relocations to Frankfurt, Paris, Luxembourg or Dublin, and whether it's JP Morgan warning that 1,000-4,000 jobs could go overseas, or Goldman's, Lloyd Blankfein, tweeting about great meetings in Frankfurt, it was Morgan Stanley that hit the

nail on the head by remarking that: "What the politicians don't understand is these are people". Brexit will have consequences for everyone, most of all for the individuals doing the relocating. If a family's involved, it becomes doubly complicated.

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Relocation and Global Mobility

Moving a job from A to B has never been easy because it's not just a job: it's a person with their own plans and desires, family and friends, furniture, mortgages and other commitments. Indeed, the complexity of the relocation process has spawned a whole industry of dedicated global mobility and relocation firms to help with the logistics. Then there's the position itself: most jobs have to be assessed through a formal job evaluation system in order for a specialist to decide what the same, or another position, is worth in the host country. This is followed by potential adjustments to salary to take into account cost of living and tax, questions as to who will pay how much for the host country housing, schooling, utilities or flights home. The first two are often the biggest financial costs of an international assignment, and usually companies will pay for this, at least for a year or two.

But financial costs are only one element to be considered when relocating. Often those dedicated firms stop at this basecamp whilst employees are left to tackle the rest of the mountain alone. Factors like the language and culture of the new country may be considered in a location allowance but often, hands on help for the more practical issues is not given. For

example; where to source medical care? How to open bank accounts and how to convert their driving licences? The list goes on and on. Much of this can be managed with a carefully thought-out information pack, but in some areas the personal touch is definitely required.

Relocating Families

All of that represents just a single-status assignment – probably the most straightforward kind. But given the seniority of the individuals involved a lot of assignments today are for at least a couple, if not an entire family. The complications thus multiply exponentially: marriage status can make a difference to tax. In some countries, you may technically not be allowed to live together if you're not married. Ditto for same-sex couples. What of the job status of the 'trailing spouse'? Will they find work in the host country, or will they suddenly find themselves the main carer for their children? This can be a huge and stressful change for families, particularly where one parent has quit a successful job to follow their partner abroad.

Next, there's the children to consider: if both parents are working, who will take care of the children? How will they adapt to their new country? Will they attend nursery or need home support? How easily will they adopt the new culture and language?

Every parent will want their children to be happy in the host country, and in many cases this will start with making friends and thereby integrating into the host country. With very young children, a nanny or an au pair may be sought – someone who knows the local playgroups and parks, who speaks the language and can help the children learn. Or perhaps a nursery or a childminder is a better bet. But childcare systems are different in every country: in the whirlwind of emotions and practicalities that surround any relocation, how can an employee even know what options are available, let alone which is best, what the rules are, how to go about finding places, understanding waiting lists and application procedures? In a foreign language? When also possibly working at the same time?

Whilst smaller children will generally adapt much faster to a new environment; school-age children tend to be quite attached to their schools and their circle of friends, and it can be a real worry for parents and child alike to take them out of that environment – especially if they have special educational needs. The curriculum and

language of instruction is another worry: should they look for a place at an international school rather than a local one? If so, is there a waiting list? How long is it? How many spaces have already been reserved by companies that have, in the wake of Brexit, started reserving places for their potential assignees already?

These are only part of the myriad of questions that arise when a family is asked to relocate. A company's HR teams will be busy managing all the administrative tasks around the assignment, which is no small feat in and of itself. But whilst relocation companies will take care of shipping the assignee's goods, who is taking care of the needs of the family? Because if you ask an employee to make what essentially boils down to a decision between their job and their family, the result may cost the company dearly in experience walking out the door.

Here's an oft-overlooked fact to consider: the fit of the family with its new life is the most commonly quoted reason for an assignment to fail. Get the personal side of relocations right and you'll see a stronger family unit – whatever its makeup, and a more loyal, dedicated employee. And a stronger family unit is far more able to provide itself with mutual support and reassurance, to tough it out and weather whatever financial, commercial or political explosions may arise. Brexit may cause a few heated exchanges but with tailored bespoke care and attention, relocation meltdowns for key employees can be avoided.



SARAH-JANE BUTLER

CEO and Founder of Parental Choice
Parental Choice provides childcare and family support to corporate and other employers in the UK and internationally. Working closely with global mobility, Parental Choice's services specifically support families relocating into and out of the UK to Europe and Asia. Sarah-Jane set up Parental Choice to ensure that employers, being those closest to employees who were parents, were in the best position to support them, not only in terms of information but also practical advice and search and selection services, as well as handholding upon arrival in the host country.

Aside from running Parental Choice, Sarah-Jane is also a Trustee of the Family and Childcare Trust and a Changemaker supporting Working Families. She is on the CIPD Policy Forum and has been involved with Government consultations on childcare as well as speaking

publicly at Government policy briefings on topics such as "Bridging the Gender Equality Gap - The Future Role of Women" and the "Back to Work for Women" programme. She has attended several HR summits in her role as director of Parental Choice, including speaking at the Institute of Director's "Women in Business" conference.

In 2014, Sarah-Jane was recognised by Brummell Magazine as one of the City's Top Inspirational Entrepreneurs, whilst Parental Choice was short-listed for the SME Employer of the Year Award by WorkingMums. More recently Parental Choice was named one of the Top 10 Small Employers for Working Families 2015 and was highly commended in the annual Mumandworking Awards 2016. October 2015 also saw the company receive Family Friendly UK Employer accreditation from the Family and Childcare Trust in recognition of its commitment to placing the needs of families at the centre of its vision as a company.

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