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Non-Traditional Assignees: Looking for Talent in all the Right Places

For quite some time, the typical international assignee has been assumed to be a senior male staff member in their late 40s or early 50s who has almost always been accompanied by their (often non-working) wife and two children. In the last decade, this traditional profile of assignees has finally begun to change.

We now see a less traditional demographic of assignees emerging: executive women; married couples with no children; single and unaccompanied people; younger expatriates, and those from non-Western countries as companies attempt to expand their talent pool options while struggling to fulfill their global staffing needs.

In this article, we explain who non-traditional assignees are, the challenges that some of them face when relocating internationally, and how even small policy improvements can make a big difference to their success in a new environment.

Who are non-traditional assignees?

Non-traditional assignees represent a diverse and growing segment of the global talent pool constituting up to 10 or more different types of assignees, including those with multi-generational responsibilities and special needs children, single-parent and split families, and lesbian and gay assignees.

Non-traditional assignees may have a number of circumstances that standard global mobility policies typically do not address. They differ from traditional assignees for many reasons, such as:

- (a) Family composition, e.g., step, single-parent, split/unaccompanied family, overseas adoption, and multi-generational families
- (b) Family challenges, e.g., special needs children
- (c) Family status, e.g., single expatriates, semi-retired empty-nesters
- (d) Sexual orientation, e.g., lesbian, gay, transgender
- (e) Gender, e.g., female breadwinners with male trailing spouses, single female expatriates



A key trait common to non-traditional assignees is their hyper-diversity; “diverse” in the sense that, before even relocating abroad, these employees often represent a unique point of difference compared with many of their colleagues, and “hyper” because expatriation adds another layer of complexity to their already differentiated status. Importantly, while there may be many types of hyper-diversity, assignees often do not fit neatly into one particular category and instead overlap two or more thereby incurring “double minority” status. This may happen, for example, where a family engages in an overseas adoption and is also a blended family which has, in the past, engaged in a split family arrangement; or where a split family has a special needs child which may be the reason why the family members have elected to live in different locations.

Female Assignees

Female assignees remain a strong contingent of the non-traditional assignee talent pool, as do single men and single women. The 2014 Brookfield GRS Global Mobility Trends Survey shows that the percentage of women sent on international assignments has increased over the last two decades, from 3 percent in the early 1990s to 20 percent in 2014, comparing favorably with US national relocation data showing that 37 percent of US domestic transferees are women.

Married and accompanied female assignees are among the most common type of non-traditional assignee and are characterized by the family's primary income being generated by a wife, whose career necessitates a move abroad. In a 2012 study, McNulty reported that approximately 10 percent of international assignees represent female breadwinner families with accompanying male spouses¹.

The increasing number of female assignees should not be surprising given women's increased level of education and along with it their increasing rate of overall employment (irrespective of child care responsibilities), as well as the valuable economic and financial contributions they make within families. This is coupled with other drivers that include their need to accept international assignments in order to advance their careers, and that gender diversity is shown by many companies to en-

hance corporate performance, particularly during expatriation².

Yet, female assignees still appear to be under-utilized with statistics remaining steady at between 17 and 20 per cent for the past five years. This suggests there may be a glass ceiling for women wishing to engage in international assignments.

What we do know is that the number of female assignees could increase with appropriate organizational support and intervention. This requires debunking the myth that women do not want international assignment opportunities due to political risk or gender bias in some host-countries, their childcare responsibilities, or because their husbands will not agree to go.

While such stereotyping is an ongoing challenge, research has found that women's resistance to taking an international assignment has more to do with them viewing expatriation as a less successful career path compared to their male colleagues because women tend to be offered, and to occupy, lower positions despite having equal tenure and/or prior expatriate experience. Because of this, many potential female assignees believe they will be given less access to fast-track career programs, career counseling, and career planning compared to male expatriates³.

Creating opportunities for female assignees centers largely on addressing dual-career issues for an accompanying male trailing spouse and the difficulties associated with balancing career with child caring – challenges that are also common to non-relocating women. Male trailing spouses need help and support to acclimatize to their unusual status, ranging from the suspicion of potential employers, to being ostracized by locals, and ignored by females in the same network.

Compounding the problem is the absence of adequate organizational support to alleviate professional stress, where career-oriented male partners have been shown to have lower adjustment than their female counter-

parts when they suffer job losses, and whose identity is negatively affected by not successfully fulfilling the role of breadwinner for their family. Feelings of defeat among men can then surface as a result of changes in gender roles and may significantly undermine the success of their wives⁴.

The biggest factor that can drive success for female assignees, particularly those who are married and accompanied on assignment, is joint decision-making as to whether to engage in an international assignment, with the understanding and sufficient buy-in on both sides that the relocation will benefit the *whole* family. This type of healthy decision-making and 'teamwork' approach is supported by recent research showing, for example, that females generally give more attention to their partners' willingness to relocate in the decision to accept an international assignment, than males do in reverse. It generally means that male trailing spouses also do not feel resentment towards their wives' employer about a relocation and they display less ownership of their wives' career than female trailing spouses do of their breadwinner husbands. Lack of resentment towards a wife's career, in turn, can be crucial to their success in the early years, given that women can be required to sacrifice family and personal time in order to climb the corporate ladder and be a 'team player'.

Split Families

The 2014 Brookfield GRS GMTS found that 49 per cent of companies engage in split family assignments for assignments of one year or longer, representing an 8 per cent increase since 2013. A split family is one where an international assignee's immediate family remains in the home country or old location while the assignee expatriates 'unaccompanied' to the (new) host location. Such arrangements may be temporary, for example, to allow a child to finish the school year in the home/old location, before the family then joins the assignee in the new location; or permanent, for example, where an assignee enters into a 'commuter marriage' situ-

ation indefinitely due to a spouse's career.

These types of assignments often provide for additional home leave to and from the home and host countries to allow for separated family members to visit each other, along with some additional compensation such as a separation allowance or a change in the length of the assignment to either a short-term assignment or business trip. It is common practice, however, that unaccompanied assignees receive only single-status benefits once on assignment, forgoing lifestyle, spouse and other types of support.

A recent report⁵ found that,

split families exist in a variety of forms including: (1) family stays in the home location and assignee relocates with more frequent trips home; (2) family and assignee relocate to the host country, and family lives in a tier 1 location while assignee commutes to a 2nd or 3rd tier location and returns on the weekend (an arrangement common in non-governmental organizations such as the United Nations when families are sent to hardship or dangerous locations); or (3) family and assignee relocate to a 'livable' host country and assignee commutes from there to a different country. While option (1) may be less expensive or cost neutral, and options (2) and (3) more expensive, these options are nonetheless used in a number of industries and locations where the expense is viewed as a non-optional business cost of positioning key talent and candidates of choice. (p. 19)

The 2014 Brookfield GRS GMTS shows that the percentage of married/with partner assignees that elect to undertake a split assignment has remained steady at between 18 to 22 per cent for the past eight years since 2007, with approximately 35 per cent of



companies using 'unaccompanied' as an assignment type or policy.

We attribute the use of split family assignments to several factors including the spouse/partner's unwillingness to let go of the family's two-income status in a tough economic environment, along with the perceived hardship that often comes with assignments to emerging markets. It is also possible that companies' current international assignment programs are still not adequately meeting the needs of employees with spouses and families, causing them to decline international assignment opportunities or to opt for 'unaccompanied' status.

Critical family challenges include spouse/partner resistance, family adjustment, children's education opportunities, difficult host location, intercultural adjustment, dual-career issues, and language barriers. Further, the growth of assignees from developing locations/countries may increase the rate of unaccompanied assignees for companies whose assignment policies may not be designed to accurately reflect the needs, attitudes and requirements of this segment of the talent pool.

While split family assignments are used by companies to reduce the barriers to mobility and address talent shortages, there are nonetheless likely to be significant personal costs to the family itself arising from the separation of a spouse from their partner and dependent children, including the temporary single parent status the remaining parent assumes.

Reports from mobility managers show there is consensus that policies provide little support for split families beyond things such as home-leave assistance. Yet, the challenges that split families face are those that many other non-traditional assignee families also face: access to support networks and overcoming loneliness as in the case of single-parents, and the financial pressure to continue with expatriation beyond what many families can often cope with.

Lesbian and Gay Expatriates

In many organisations, it is common knowledge that lesbian and gay em-

ployees often pursue less-rewarding careers because they feel 'safer' and 'more welcoming', suggesting there may be a corporate ceiling or 'glass border' that does not allow them to advance and prosper either at home, much less abroad.

For lesbian and gay assignees, a major consideration is whether or not they are 'out' to their employer. Gedro notes that when an employee remains in the 'global closet' they are unlikely to volunteer for global career opportunities and just as likely to turn them down if the host country is known to be unwelcoming to lesbians and gays, without ever revealing to their employer the true nature of their sexuality⁶. Such self-discrimination arises predominantly out of the fear of being stigmatized, unsupported, or discriminated against by colleagues in both the home and host country, or from lacking in confidence to be successful in an international setting.

By all accounts, the most helpful types of support that assist lesbian and gay assignees is to avoid stigmatizing them due to their status, providing them access to others like them, and overcoming practical restrictions relating to immigration and marital status. Importantly, while lesbian and gay assignees recognize that their unique circumstances might never result in their being granted the full status afforded to 'traditional' assignees, being supported through 'allies' and having effective HR policies in place are steps in the right direction⁷.

Additionally, the context within which expatriation occurs, namely the foreign setting, needs careful thought and consideration from a policy standpoint in terms of: (a) the safety of the host country culture for homosexuals; (b) whether the assignee has a partner and if familial circumstances will be recognizable and problematic to others; and, (c) the requirement that they may need to come 'out of the closet' in order to undertake an assignment in terms of the legalities surrounding their

same-sex marital status, as well as receive benefits and entitlements for their spouse and dependents.

Conclusion

The decision to accept an international assignment will always be a personal one for the employee, who will subsequently retain private responsibility for the ultimate success or failure of the opportunity to go abroad. At the same time, companies have a public responsibility to ensure their policies and practices are in keeping with the times, and that policy provisions can adequately support the changing demographics of the global talent pool, within the limits of what is safe and legal in countries to which a company sends its employees on assignment.

With this in mind, there is a need for companies to develop international assignment policies that are supportive of non-traditional assignees, noting that they often face a double burden and in most cases need more organizational support than what is given to traditional assignees. While the additional policy components required are not likely to be overly expensive, it does require some 'out of the box' thinking and clear communication with assignees as to their specific needs and how, or if, they may be met.

Types of Non-Traditional Assignees

Step-Family - Where one or both parents has children from a previous relationship that are not genetically or biologically related to the other parent. Also known as 'blended family'.

Single-Parent Family - A parent, who is the primary caregiver for one or more children, that does not live with a spouse or partner.

Split Family - An assignee who relocates abroad unaccompanied by a partner and/or children.

Overseas Adoption Family - An employee who lives abroad that adopts a child from the country in which he or she is resident. Expatriate adoption can also include third country adoption.



Multigenerational Family - A dependent relative who would normally reside with the employee in the home country and who relies on the assignee for the majority of their financial support.

LGBT - Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender assignees whose accompanying partner is typically of the same sex to the assignee and included in the definition of family for the purposes of international assignment benefits as determined by the assignee's home country organization's policies.

Family with Special Needs Child/ren - Expatriate children that require special attention and specific necessities that other children do not. Common examples include children with autism, downs syndrome, and dyslexia.

Female Breadwinner (w/ male trailing spouse) - Primary income is generated by the wife and whose career takes priority over that of her husband.

Single Male and Female - Male and female assignees with no dependents.

Semi-retired Empty-nester - A person typically between the age of 55 and 60 whose children have grown up and moved away from home and who is in the early stages of retirement. Relocating abroad is not seen as something essential for financial or career reasons but rather as an adventure.

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Yvonne McNulty, Ph.D.

This article was authored by Yvonne McNulty, Ph.D. for Brookfield Global Relocation Services, LLC (Brookfield GRS). For questions regarding this article, or assistance in any other services provided by the Brookfield GRS Consulting Services department, please contact Jill Taylor at strategicadvisor@brookfieldgrs.com or 1-630-972-2280.

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