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Talent Management for Dual-Career Expatriate Couples

One of the most significant barriers to global mobility is the dual-career issue among potential assignee couples. The selection of international assignee candidates is undoubtedly complex and made more arduous for a niche group of assignees with a career-oriented spouse / partner. In this situation, one spouse / partner's career advancement will often be at the expense of the other spouse / partner, who may either need to give up paid employment entirely, secure a 'job' as opposed to a career-fulfilling role, or change their career to accommodate the challenges that an international relocation presents. The 2015 Brookfield Global Relocation Services (Brookfield GRS) Global Mobility Trends Survey (GMTS) shows, for example, that just under half of spouse / partners (48 percent) were employed in careers prior to expatriating, but that only 11 percent were gainfully employed once on assignment. Additionally, many surveys show that the top barriers to mobility are 'family and personal circumstances' and 'spouse/partner's career'. Undoubtedly, the dual-career issue can sometimes make global talent management a seemingly insurmountable problem.

In this article, we present a balanced perspective of the dual-career dilemma. To begin, we will review the challenges of dual-career expatriation, and then present a typology of four different types of dual-career expatriate families with the intention of challenging the widely-held assumption of there being only one type of dual-career family that companies are required to support. We will then suggest ways in which companies can guide their assignees through this often complex and important issue, as well as pointers for expatriates themselves.

Dual-Career Expatriation Remains Challenging

Dual-career expatriates are defined as: families that relocate internationally in which both spouses / partners have career responsibilities and aspirations combined with a strong psychological commitment to their careers and professional growth, as well as to the marital relationship. The strong commitment by both partners to their separate careers can make it challenging for organizations to put forth convincing arguments for these families to accept global mobility opportunities. This is particularly true when language and work permit barriers require that one spouse / partner puts their career



ambitions on hold (to become the 'trailing spouse') in order to help realize their spouse / partner's international career opportunity. Dual-career expatriation can, therefore, be an inordinately difficult personal and professional decision. Unlike stay-at-home spouse / partners who may have little interest in professional pursuits, potential assignees with career-oriented partners bring an additional factor to the negotiating table as to whether to accept or to extend an assignment, and that is a bargaining chip that is often difficult to placate with financial or other incentives – their career.

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- some companies do not support paid employment for dependent spouse / partners as a result of relocating abroad, which can include couples working for the same organization where spouse / partner employment in the same location is actively discouraged
- host-country laws restricting access to work permits for dependent spouse / partners is a barrier, even if opportunities to gain employment are available
- there may be an inability to compete in the job market due to language and qualification differences
- taking an extended work break while abroad can be problematic in some professions (e.g. law, medicine, and accounting) due to 'losing touch' with home-country licensing regulations
- long absences from employment may be psychologically unacceptable relative to the occupational prestige a 'trailing spouse' derives from their career



- career-oriented spouse / partners are often reluctant to give up their professional identity to assume 'housewife' or 'trailing spouse' status
- an inability to financially contribute to total family income may not be economically viable for some expatriate families, particularly when the host-country cost of living is high and the remuneration package offered (e.g., localisation or local-plus) is not likely

to cover the additional expense of housing and schooling.

Given the relative economic stability a second income may provide when abroad, dual-career expatriation often presents as a formidable barrier. This may explain why in the 2015 GMTS a rise in married assignees undertaking single-status long-term unaccompanied assignments was noted, from 38 percent in 2012 to 45 percent in 2015, being a likely result of the desire by many dual-career families to preserve their two-income status, especially during economically difficult periods.

Thirty-five percent (35%) of companies report that spouse / partner careers or employment currently have an impact on their ability to attract employees for assignment. Over two-thirds of respondents indicated that when looking ahead they expect spouse / partner career concerns to have even greater impact on their company's ability to attract candidates of choice. That said, a majority of companies don't provide support that specifically addresses spouse / partner employment or career concerns while on assignment, but rather focus on assistance such as language or intercultural training. Only 41% provide education / training assistance, and 35% provide career planning assistance.

A large body of research shows that accompanying spouse / partner issues, including psychological or physiological problems such as addiction and depression, can be problematic for companies, with implications in the short- and long-term in terms of negative crossover and spillover effects potentially impacting an expatriate employee's performance. Difficulties in re-constructing a personal and professional identity in a new environment can result in powerlessness and feelings of isolation, disappointment, frustration, and anger during international assignments. Additionally, poor organizational support may lead to increases in split families, where family members return prematurely to the home location while an expatriate remains in situ to see out an assignment and then repatriate, or where family members already on assignment refuse to relocate to the next location.

These problems can be more serious for 'career' expatriates whose international mobility frequently extends over multiple continuous

assignments (including increasing movement into emerging and undeveloped markets) such that, due to the constant disruption of rebuilding social and professional networks through each subsequent move, it can be impossible for their spouse / partners to continue an existing career or to engage in a new one.

The problems of dual-career expatriation can be further exacerbated for married female expatriates with accompanying male spouse / partners, given the unusual nature of their status as 'house-husband' or 'stay-at-home dad.' Women have traditionally subordinated their careers for their husbands', unhindered by the constraints of managing a dual-career expatriate family, but at the same time, Brookfield GRS' 2015 GMTS shows that the number of female expatriates is increasing. Yet there remains a lack of adequate programs in expatriate communities to support male dual-career spouse / partners.

The number of dual-career expatriate couples is substantial, since the majority of expatriates are married and are accompanied by children. Yet, recent studies show that companies do little to help resolve the dual-career problem among expatriates. McNulty found, for example, that professional company support to address the dual-career issue was lacking despite being perceived by trailing spouse / partners as having a major impact on their ability to reconstruct an identity once abroad, which in turn impacts their adjustment.

Assistance to find meaningful work opportunities was found to be a "major failing" on the part of companies because, while companies generally give considerable attention to the logistics of an international relocation, much less attention is given to the professional and social skills necessary for the trailing spouse / partner to adjust to their new circumstances in terms of adapting to, and building, a 'meaningful portable life'.

Cole similarly found that there are few adequate programs available that are targeted towards supporting career-oriented trailing spouse / partners, particularly males, with only 18 percent of career-oriented spouse / partners receiving employer-provided career assistance, despite that most perceived it would be helpful in their job search abroad.

The Permits Foundation further reports that addressing spouse / partners' career and employment challenges is a central component in the decision to accept an international assignment, being particularly key among male spouse / partners, younger age groups, unmarried partners, and those with a university degree. Of the 3,300 respondents, nearly 60 percent indicated that they would be unlikely in the future to relocate to a country where it is difficult for a spouse / partner to get a work permit and continue their career.

The above notwithstanding, it may be unfair to suggest that companies alone are responsible for solving the dual-career issue: the fact remains that it may be an unavoidable reality of modern employment that two-career families are increasingly becoming the norm and international experience is becoming a prerequisite for career success. The incidence of dual-career couples among expatriates may be even greater as assignees themselves tend to be highly educated and career-focused, and many typically marry, or have a partner, that

is a person of a similar socio-economic background and professional standing. Indeed, because women have become more economically independent due to their increased participation in the labor force, they may be unwilling to give up their long-term independence for the international relocation of their spouse / partner.

Employment versus Unemployment

Being in a dual-career expatriate family does not imply that both spouse / partners are necessarily working during an international relocation. In a recent study of American expatriates in Europe it was found that career-oriented spouse / partners willingly expatriated without a job to a new location with their spouse / partners, preferring to initiate their job search once there. The Permits Foundation reports similar findings where many spouse / partners relocating abroad with their families consider themselves highly career-oriented in spite of their inability, or decision not to secure paid employment in a new location.

Associations such as Primetime Business & Women's Professional Association in Singapore (<http://primetime.org.sg>), and Expatriate Professional Women's Society in Shanghai (<http://epwsasia.org>), whose membership includes many non-working career oriented members, are a testament to the need to support trailing spouse / partners professionally even when they are unemployed. The important point here is that dual-career orientation does not end due to temporary or long-term unemployment.

Dual-Career Expatriate 'Journey'

While most people view dual-career expatriation as a static event that couples enter into once the assignment contract is signed, the reality is that it is an ongoing process that involves members of the dual-career family over the entire duration of the assignment, and often beyond. The process predominantly involves embarking on a unique journey of professional identity development for the spouse / partner who is giving up their job or career to relocate abroad. The journey itself requires the development of dual-career competencies to improve the likelihood of overall international assignment success. Yet it can be hampered by several factors including:

- the stage of a trailing spouse / partner's professional career (early, climbing the ladder, semi-retirement)
- the professional discipline in which a trailing spouse / partner is engaged, e.g., whether professional licensing is required in order to continue a career in a new location
- the flexibility of the trailing spouse / partner's career goals and aspirations
- how dual-career expatriation decisions are made, for example, when relocation decisions are made by individuals (expatriate employees) without input from other family members (trailing spouses)

From this journey emerges a range of psychological, emotional, career, and assignment outcomes, not just for the company, but also



for the dual-career spouse / partner and their family. These outcomes include:

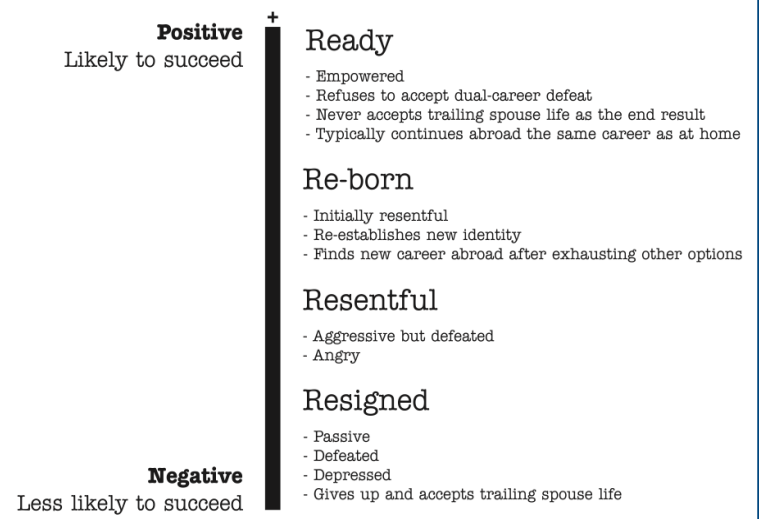
- Psychological adjustment to the new location by the dual-career trailing spouse / partner arising from a sense of purpose and identity
- Emotional strength to weather the ups and downs of living abroad in a different culture

- Career satisfaction for both spouse / partners
- Positive crossover effects between the breadwinner expatriate and dual-career trailing spouse / partner

Dual-Career Expatriate Family Typology

A recent study of dual-career expatriates found that trailing spouse / partners in dual-career families could be conceptualized as belonging to one of four distinct categories. The four categories exist on a continuum ranging from 'most likely' to 'least likely' to succeed in a dual-career expatriate situation. Figure 1 outlines the four character types as constituting the 'R' profile of dual-career expatriate families - ready, re-born, resentful, or resigned. Each of the four character types displays different characteristics that define the stage at which the trailing spouse / partner is at in their journey of professional identity development whilst abroad, while attempting to simultaneously address their particular dual-career challenge. This may involve finding new employment in an existing career, reinventing a new career and finding suitable employment to support it, or obtaining suitable paid and/or unpaid employment opportunities to support their professional identity.

Figure 1: A Typology of Dual-Career Expatriates – The 'R' Profile



Those characterized as ready and re-born are considered more likely to succeed during international relocation because they are proactive in searching for career opportunities whilst living abroad. For ready spouse / partners, dual-career success may begin even before they have arrived in the new location, whereas for re-born spouse / partners

this is likely to take place after a period of reflection, during which they search for new career opportunities different to those they may have had in their home-country or elsewhere. The defining characteristics of both character types are: (1) feeling empowered, (2) (delayed) confidence, (3) being realistic, and (4) having a pragmatic outlook. Both character types are also likely to be driven and single-minded individuals.

Ready spouse / partners display additional traits that include:

- being unlikely to agree to accept an international opportunity if their existing career cannot be continued
- adopting a structured, disciplined, logical, and sequential approach to solving their dual-career situation
- adhering to a 'change masters' approach by adopting or already possessing several important characteristics (e.g., perseverance, building coalitions, tuning into their environment) that enable them to be successful in their job search

On the other hand, re-born spouse / partners possess the following traits:

- they alter their attitude about conventional ways of getting things done (e.g., continuing in their existing career) to instead consider alternatives (e.g., a new career)
- they surround themselves with people that will support them in their endeavours and who will be helpful to their quest

In contrast to the above, those spouse / partners characterized as resentful and resigned represent the other end of the spectrum where dual-career expatriate success is less likely. These character types are unlikely to move into paid and/or fulfilling employment while living abroad and therefore are unlikely to overcome their dual-career challenge; instead, they remain stuck in a place of denial from which resigned spouse / partners in particular may never escape. The defining characteristics of both character types are: (1) feelings of defeat, (2) anger, and (3) mild or chronic depression. Both character types can also display passive-aggressive and negative attitude traits.

The Kubler Ross change cycle appropriately describes the challenges that resentful and resigned spouses face, where their movement through the grief cycle of denial-anger-bargaining-depression-acceptance is one they are unlikely to ever emerge from in relation to the loss of their career. For example, resentful spouses are likely to remain at the stage of anger, whereas resigned spouses / partners may process through all the stages to reach a point of acceptance, albeit having given up on their dual-career aspirations and mourning their loss in an endless cycle of self-pity, blame, and disdain.

What Companies Can Do

The inclusion of expatriate family members in selection decisions has for decades remained largely focused on many aspects of the relocation, except the dual-career status of accompanying partners. This includes:

- process issues such as host-location previews (familiarization trips), school and housing requirements, and cost of living considerations
- informal procedures such as the recommendations of peers and managers whether to accept the assignment and the candidate's overall self-selection and willingness to relocate
- peripheral issues such as the trailing spouse's general willingness to relocate and their ability to support the candidate in his or her new role largely as an "unpaid social ambassador" for the company

In practical terms, the dual-career expatriate typology, or R Profile, can be a highly useful tool in the selection process of expatriate candidates and their dual-career partners. For example, when interviewing candidates and their spouse / partners, questions relating to the couple's dual-career status, and the intended trailing spouse's career orientation in particular, could determine whether they are suitable (or not suitable) for international relocation on the basis of their own readiness to address their particular dual-career challenge. Those deemed ready or with the capacity to be re-born would be classified as more likely to succeed, whereas those characterized as resentful or resigned would be considered more likely to resist adaptation to the dual-career challenge.

The latter two character types may even be considered a deadly disease and deemed so sufficiently toxic that expatriating the family should be avoided at all costs. This suggests that the dual-career trailing spouse's anticipated level of difficulty in addressing the dual-career challenge is likely to severely impact on his or her spouse / partner's ability to effectively perform during the international assignment.

What Expatriates Can Do

While individuals make choices about expatriating, true dual-career family success rests with the couple themselves in terms of how the 'two' combine to create, develop, become, implement or play out a 'character type' that is geared for assignment and talent management success, rather than varying degrees of failure. The attitude of each spouse / partner can play a crucial role in terms of the willingness of the trailing spouse / partner to embark on a new 'portable' career as a better fit with their unpredictable international lifestyle, even if the 'new' career is a compromise, unsustainable over the long-term, underpaid, or not ideally what they had in mind.

The emphasis on individuals for dual-career success does not, however, excuse or provide companies with a "free pass" to forgo dual-career support. But it does nonetheless position dual-career expatriate success as being contingent on the expatriate family's attitude first and foremost, from which appropriate organizational support to address the dual-career expatriate issue is likely to be more successful. This suggests that organizational support on its own is insufficient to generate dual-career success.

Conclusion

Managing global talent can be problematic for companies, espe-

cially when it is made more complex by a dual-career expatriate family context. Central to addressing the dual-career challenge is to focus on the expatriate couple and their fundamental role as active decision-makers and problem-solvers in the context of their own dual-career situation. Nonetheless, it is important for companies to remember that although the trailing spouse / partner has no official employment status with a company, he or she is often expected to make a considerable contribution to the success of the assignment and is nonetheless greatly affected by the company's expatriate policies and practices, including how it handles the dual-career issue. Deploying company support and having assignees involved to help solve the dual-career challenge is therefore crucial.

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