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Plight of the Expat Spouse

By TANYA MOHN

Overseas assignments are more brisk after the recession, but accompanying spouses and partners still struggle to find work abroad, too.

An annual survey of global relocation trends found that 61 percent of companies surveyed expect to transfer more employees in 2011 than in recent years, higher than the historical average of 57 percent. But only 15 percent of spouses employed before going abroad were able to find overseas assignments, about 10 percent less than in 2006.

Scott Sullivan, an executive vice president of Brookfield Global Relocation Services, publishers of the annual survey, said that "trailing" spouses in the current uncertain market are especially reluctant to give up jobs — and a second income — at home because of risks to future earning potential and career development.

The lack of employment opportunities abroad for partners "wasn't as much of a challenge to companies 20 to 30 years ago," Mr. Sullivan said, but with the rise in dual-career couples, "it's become a huge issue across the board." He added, "Companies can't find the best people to go on assignments, so the talent pool for highly skilled international employees is deteriorating."

Yvonne McNulty, an assistant professor of international business at James Cook University's Singapore campus who studies mobility issues, said, "The dual-career issue remains the No. 1 reason for refusing assignments."

Some 20 years ago, financial compensation packages for expatriate families were more robust, with higher salaries and other perks like drivers, club memberships and first-class airfare for home leave so a spouse could afford not to work. Today, while packages are lower over all, "companies are being more proactive" in helping spouses find work, Ms. McNulty said.

“It has gone from nice to have to a must-have strategic support service,” said Susan R. Ginsberg, vice president, global services for Ricklin-Echikson Associates, a human resources consulting firm with professional coaches in 50 countries that specializes in career and transition assistance for spouses and partners overseas. During negotiations, the offer of support can be “key to ensure that it doesn’t become a deal breaker.”

Navdeep Boparai, originally from India, recently relocated to Houston with her husband from England. She worked as an auditor for Deloitte, and hopes to find similar work in this country. Her husband’s employer, an oil and gas company, is outsourcing counseling through Ricklin-Echikson. Even before the move, a consultant helped her write an American-style résumé, learn about the local job market and salary issues and prepare for interviews.

The adjustment has not been easy, Ms. Boparai said. “The working culture is totally different. Americans are always checking their e-mail. Here, work is life, it defines them.” She said that she wanted to know what to expect. “Otherwise,” she said, “it could be a bit of a disaster.”

Cultural issues as well as foreign languages, licensing and certification, and obtaining work permits are often obstacles to spouses getting jobs in new countries.

Kathleen van der Wilk-Carlton, executive director of the Permits Foundation, a nonprofit group based at The Hague, the Netherlands, that advocates for the improvement of work regulations for the partners of expatriate employees, said that when the foundation was set up in 2001, “only a handful of countries allowed spouses to work automatically or easily.” But, she added, “There’s been a significant improvement.”

The foundation published a survey in 2009 of 3,300 expatriate spouses in dual-career families, relocated by more than 200 employers in 117 countries.

More than 80 percent of those not working wanted to work, and those who worked were found to be more likely to report a positive impact on adjustment, family relationships, and general health and well being. They were also more willing to complete or extend current assignments or to go on new assignments than nonworking spouses.

Only 18 percent of respondents said they had received adequate career support from their spouses’ employers.

Concern for career issues was highest among spouses or partners who were male,

unmarried, younger and university graduates, all growing demographics, Mrs. Wilk-Carlton said. "As global business increases, that is only likely to get worse."

Once couples relocate, adjustment is critical. Expatriate spousal dissatisfaction is the biggest reason that assignments fail, many experts said.

"And the chances of failure are huge," said Margery Marshall, president of Vandover, a global transition support company that works with spouses on career strategy.

A failed relocation or early return can cost about \$1 million. That figure is multiplied with group moves, which are on the rise, Ms. Marshall said.

Her firm advises relocated spouses on how to connect to professional associations and build networks, find volunteer work, locate local mentors and when to consider classes.

Annette Lang successfully dealt with work challenges by becoming an entrepreneur.

It was not work permit or certification issues that prevented her from finding a job when she moved to Singapore, a country with favorable laws for expatriate spouses.

"I loved what I was doing," said Mrs. Lang, who had been head of product development for an Australian company supplying major department stores with holiday gift items using food. "I was sent around the world shopping, spending other people's money. But to set up this type of gift item business in Singapore would be virtually impossible," she said, because of the logistics and high cost of importing specialty foods.

At a dinner party at her home one evening, she got the idea for a business. A guest, impressed that the housekeeper prepared such delicious Western-style food, asked if Mrs. Lang could teach her domestic worker.

Most household staff, Mrs. Lang said, "have little exposure to our Western ways of preparing food. I have this fantastic helper really keen to learn, so I had trained her to cook healthy Western food, and how to adhere to Western sanitation standards."

After the dinner party, Mrs. Lang said, "I set out to create a business to train helpers, starting with training lessons in my home."

Today, she owns and runs [Expat Kitchen](#), a Western food-focused cooking school, and in four years she has taught more than 1,000 students.

“My dream is to take it to every Asian country,” she said.