Delivering Effective Relocation Family Support

By Yvonne McNulty Ph.D., and Sue Pember

Relocation family support has never been more important than it is today, and has emerged as critical across many different domains, including those in corporate, military, missionary, academic, foreign service, and NGO communities. Numerous studies attest to the importance of family members’ adjustment as a significant factor in overall relocation success. Yet, industry surveys show that critical relocation challenges continue to be ‘family and personal circumstances’ and ‘partner’s career’ as the top reasons for refusing to accept relocation. Additionally, the three main reasons for failed relocations continue to be family concerns, partner dissatisfaction, and an inability of the spouse to adapt.

“In global transfers, the spouse has the most difficult role of any family member. Whereas employees have the organization and job structure that continue from the home to the new country, and children have the continuity and routine of school, spouses often leave behind many of the most important aspects of their lives, including friends, relatives and meaningful activities ... the challenges of adjusting successfully are therefore both different and greater.”

At Aussie Orientation Services, we know how important relocation support can be, not just to the family but also to the working spouse and the company employing them. When the family piece is right, everything else falls into place, almost like magic. When it’s wrong, disaster can strike, often with serious consequences.

Undoubtedly, the trailing spouse plays a key role during relocation in terms of their overall willingness to go, completing the project or assignment successfully and on-time, adjusting to the new location, and supporting their partner’s performance at work. In this white paper, we draw on prior research to show that effective organizational support can play an integral part in the adjustment process for the trailing spouse, and in turn, other family members. We do so by illustrating:

(a) the types of organizational support that are most effective
(b) factors that help relocating families to adjust
(c) policy and practice recommendations for delivering effective relocation family support
**FAMILY ADJUSTMENT DURING RELOCATION**

Every relocation affects a family differently, and in multiple ways. In an ideal family situation, relationships between family members exist in a state of balance or equilibrium, where each reciprocally impacts on the psychological state of the other. During relocation, families invariably go through a variety of stressful states while at the same time attempting to maintain a sense of equilibrium - sometimes the balance can be maintained, but mostly things get ‘out of whack’ quite quickly and for reasons that often seem small and trivial to outsiders, but have deep significance for those involved.

Family relocation stress can be exacerbated, for example, by unemployment and the loss of a career for the trailing spouse along with a corresponding loss of social networks and financial independence. Losing extended family support can also be extraordinarily difficult, particularly for families with children who may be entering new schools. For men who assume the trailing spouse role, life can be equally tough especially adjusting to new family roles and responsibilities along with shifts in relationship dynamics within the family unit can send stress levels sky high.

‘Normal’ relocations (if there is such a thing) typically involve ongoing adjustments as family members strive to maintain equilibrium by offsetting a change in one area of their life (e.g., family life as a result of a move) with a corresponding change in another area of their life (e.g., increased organizational support to cope with the demands of the relocation). This is where effective organizational support can have a major impact.

Given that family members have no official employment status with a company but are nonetheless greatly affected by its relocation policies and practices, the role of organizational support is critical. In fact, for some companies it may act as a proxy for their direct involvement in the personal lives of family members to address some of the challenges noted above.

A recent study nonetheless shows that less than one third of trailing spouses (29%) rate the organizational support they receive as ‘good’ or ‘excellent.’ Many complain about having an indirect or ‘shadowed’ relationship with their partners’ company and subsequently find it difficult to obtain information about relocation policies and practices, with one spouse commenting, ‘I feel cut off from a process that affects my life deeply.’ A further concern is the lack of respect and professionalism shown by HR staff towards their family’s relocation situation. Words used to describe HR staff include ‘mean’, ‘stubborn’, ‘out of touch’, and ‘clueless’, with a sense that the needs of family members are trivialised or ignored by the very people employed to help them. Adding to this stress is the knowledge that companies abuse the role of the trailing spouse by expecting them to assume relocation responsibilities that should instead be outsourced to external vendors or assigned to their partner. The feeling that, “My husband is supposed to keep working his hours and relocate [because] companies base this on the fact that there should be a housewife at home dealing with it” is echoed numerous times.

“Words used to describe HR staff include ‘mean’, ‘stubborn’, ‘out of touch’, and ‘clueless’, with a sense that the needs of family members are trivialised or ignored by the very people employed to help them.”
DON’T SET THEM UP TO FAIL WITH A LIFESTYLE THAT IS TOO PRICEY

It always baffles me when I hear people say relocation is all about getting a rental property in the ‘right area’. The thing most HR managers and recruiters tend to overlook is the importance of setting the scene at the beginning. What I mean is that, even though relocatees might see Australia as a very attractive option in terms of lifestyle, it nonetheless has a high cost of living compared to many other cities around the world. What is critical, then, is a two-fold approach:

1. to set the expectations of rental property prices correctly from the beginning
2. to profile the candidate at day one so the relocation provider can tailor the settling-in experience to their individual requirements.

Another very important point to consider is that the person being offered the job may not be the decision maker, especially where children are involved. This may be the case not only with the decision to accept the job but also with how long they decide to stay.

At Aussie, we research the most suitable suburbs and schools for an individual family’s needs and budget, while collating information on other important factors such as medical needs, sporting interests, and whether the employment contract that brought the family to the new location is fixed or open-ended. What works exceptionally well is to get a relocation provider involved from the start to determine these needs and to avoid wasting time during the tense ‘first few weeks’ when nerves are on edge and everyone is exhausted physically and emotionally from the move. When contact is delayed between the potential candidate and relocation provider, relocation issues can be magnified by a great deal of propaganda and emotional blogging on the internet. At Aussie, we know from first hand experience there is a lot of incorrect and misleading information on the ‘moving overseas’ websites that target new employees and potential candidates - information that can do a lot of damage.

I have witnessed, for example, property owners and developers posting fictional information to try to boost the price and popularity of particular suburbs, whereas other websites advise it is crucial to spend $1,500 a week on a rental property and to send your children to an expensive private school. When candidates factor this into their budget pre-location, they may decide for financial reasons to turn down the job opportunity. A recent case illustrates our point, with a family considering sending their children to an expensive private school for $27,000 per year and renting a home in a western suburbs river suburb for $1,500pw. We presented alternative options in other river suburbs such as Shelley and Rossmoyne with high-performing local public primary and secondary schools at a cost of $4,000 per year and comparable housing renting at $800 per week. This saved the potential candidate with two children a total of $82,000 per year.

At Aussie, it is not uncommon for us to receive a call from an extremely frustrated recruitment company or HR manager who has been working on a potential candidate for months only to find they have gone cold. The reason is usually a spouse with cold feet because they are completely overwhelmed and daunted by the move. If this is the case, we have a Skype or phone conversation with the spouse immediately about their move and answer as many of their questions and concerns as quickly as possible, most of which involve concerns about housing, schooling and making friends in a new city. On many occasions we are able to salvage the situation and the family decides to relocate to the new location, but not with some damage to the momentum and excitement they initially felt about the prospect of relocating. Typical comments include, “why didn’t they let me talk to you earlier?” or “If I knew that was the case, we would have been there yesterday!”

At Aussie, we operate on a fundamental belief that it is absolutely critical:
MOST EFFECTIVE TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

Prior research shows that a trailing spouse adjusts better to a new location when they are offered a combination of practical, professional and social support. What does this involve?

**Practical support** includes pre-relocation visits to the new location, furniture storage, tax advice, interim accommodation, home-sale assistance, and (if needed) language courses, cross-cultural training, and immigration paperwork.

**Professional support** involves job search assistance, career counseling, résumé preparation, work permit assistance, and retraining/tuition reimbursement.

**Social support** requires introductions to other relocatees, memberships to sports and social clubs, and information about and access to relocation forums and spouse networking groups.

Most Effective Types of Organizational Support for Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Neither Important or unimportant</th>
<th>Unimportant</th>
<th>Type of Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to technology (email, internet)</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding and/or subsidizing housing</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Practical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing support after first 3 months</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Practical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient time for family to adjust</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company funded home-location visits</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsidizing decreases in family income</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education assistance</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsourcing relocation program to external vendors</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Practical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-departure training</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Professional/Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner’s availability to assist with relocation</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring or coaching program</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Professional/Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance with finding paid work</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner’s work-related travel schedule</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Whilst practical support is the most common type of relocation resource provided to family members, it is often criticized because it is not tailored to the unique circumstances of the family members involved, or not offered for a long enough period of time, i.e., it is offered only within the first three months of the relocation when family members are often too busy getting over the shock of moving to avail themselves of the opportunity to use it.
HELPING FAMILY MEMBERS ADJUST

A number of activities have been identified as helping families adjust during relocation. Using internet and email (91%), socializing with relocatees (90%), and spending time with their partner and children (81%) top of the list. Unfortunately, for some families it is not possible to spend sufficient time with one partner or parent due to the nature of their work, e.g., FIFO or extended business travel, which can be a major source of marital tension and frustration. Surprisingly, the least important activity that helps families adjust is voluntary or unpaid work (41%), which is resented by some family members as ‘supporting the local citizens for free’, without being ‘good enough to be employed, pay my taxes and be given my independence’.

Adjustment Coping Mechanisms During Relocation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Type of Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using internet or email</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializing with relocatees</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending time with partner/children</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping in touch with family back home</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializing with locals</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning host location language</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Professional/Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sporting clubs and associations</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massage, yoga, meditation, journal writing</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary or unpaid work</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Professional/Social</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


CLUB AUSSIE

Club Aussie is our signature program open to all relocated families. For as little as $195 + GST per annum (for family membership), members can participate in over 100 social events each year, including:

Social Events
Migrant Meet & Greets, Mothers Group, Book Club, Wine Club & Sports Clinics, Fashion High Teas

Cultural Transition Seminars
New School Transitioning, Guide to Living & Working, Career Coaching, Language Coaching, Buying Property in Western Australia, Applying for Permanent Residency

Ongoing Support
Access to 24/7 local advice and knowledge from a team of experienced “locals”

Club Aussie is designed with one goal in mind - to create a community in which we can communicate, teach, learn and facilitate the continuation of the relocation process to then drive increased performance and effectiveness of your employees in a multicultural environment.
Delivering Effective Relocation Family Support

**Migrant Meet & Greet**

The quarterly meet & greet events are a large (100+) networking BBQ or Picnic held at a public reserve, playground, river or beach location on a Sunday morning or afternoon. If there is a special occasion in the planned month, e.g., Easter or Christmas, then we will create food and an entertainment theme to suit.

These events are free for clients to attend and connect with other new arrivals to form friendships whilst finding out more about their local community. Children’s entertainment is provided.

**Living & Working in Australia Workshop**

This workshop provides participants with essential knowledge and awareness to assist with a successful transition into Australian culture, covering important topics such as Australian history, societal differences, business culture, overcoming homesickness, school changes, and support for the non-working spouse. By taking the time to consider the impact of relocation and cultural differences, participants will be better equipped to deal with the emotional journey of working and living abroad.

**Spouse Career Guidance Seminar**

Designed for partners of clients needing assistance and guidance to navigate the Australian recruitment market and obtain meaningful employment. Topics include how to prepare a Curriculum Vitae, cover letters, and handling face to face interviews.

**School Transition Workshops**

Designed for new arrivals with children starting primary or high school. This one hour information session provides parents with practical strategies for supporting their child(ren) as they integrate into a new school setting.
POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DELIVERING EFFECTIVE RELOCATION FAMILY SUPPORT

01
Employ HR staff with personal relocation experience as a necessary pre-requisite for working in this field

02
Establish a direct communication link between the company and the trailing spouse, irrespective of their non-employee status; funnelling important documents about a relocation through the employee is risky as the information often does not make it home

03
Give employees sufficient time to settle-in with their families upon arrival in the new location before inundating them with work commitments and extended business travel

04
Assist the trailing spouse in finding a job (e.g. obtaining work permits, using a career coach, updating a resume), or helping them stay connected remotely to their career (i.e. through paid subscriptions, associations); help them to build a new career or provide a sense of meaning and purpose via appropriate volunteer work

05
If employment is not an option or not desired, help spouses with the reimbursement of education-related costs to compensate for the loss of spousal income, or childcare to facilitate attendance at courses

06
To reduce the stress of isolation, sponsor memberships of local social clubs and provide training in networking skills

07
Organize introductory social events in the new location

08
Provide realistic overviews prior to and during a relocation to help trailing spouses accurately identify the challenges they might face and as well as the personal attributes they may bring to their situation to overcome some of these challenges; this can be facilitated through coaching, counseling, or the provision of books and other reading material in combination with knowledge of, and access to, appropriate online resources
REFERENCES


FURTHER READING


FOOTNOTES


ABOUT AUSSIE ORIENTATION SERVICES

We specialize in tailor made one-on-one relocation programs to ensure employees moving to Australia from overseas and interstate settle in from the start. We are more than just a relocation company. Our service provides new arrivals with a smooth transition into the Australia way of life and our ongoing support helps them engage and connect into the community. To see how we can help your company, contact our team at http://www.aussieos.com.au

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Yvonne McNulty (Ph.D.) is Associate Faculty at the Singapore Institute of Management University and can be contacted at ymcnulty@expatresearch.com

Sue Pember is Founder and Managing Director at Aussie Orientation Services and can be contacted at sue.pember@aussieos.com.au

RESOURCES

Ngala http://www.ngala.com.au/ provider of Early Parenting and Early Childhood services with a passion for supporting and guiding families and young children through the journey of parenting

French-Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Perth) http://wa@facci.com.au

After hours GP (doctor) helpline 1300 780 011 / 1800 022 222
dialanangel.com Australia’s only national group specialising in Home, Aged, Child and Family care.

urbanwalkabout.com Visual, carefully curated and easy-to-use guides that point visitors (and many locals) to independent, authentic and beautiful local businesses in Perth

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Yvonne McNulty (Ph.D.) is Associate Faculty at the Singapore Institute of Management University and can be contacted at ymcnulty@expatresearch.com

Sue Pember is Founder and Managing Director at Aussie Orientation Services and can be contacted at sue.pember@aussieos.com.au

RESOURCES

Ngala http://www.ngala.com.au/ provider of Early Parenting and Early Childhood services with a passion for supporting and guiding families and young children through the journey of parenting

French-Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Perth) http://wa@facci.com.au

After hours GP (doctor) helpline 1300 780 011 / 1800 022 222
dialanangel.com Australia’s only national group specialising in Home, Aged, Child and Family care.

urbanwalkabout.com Visual, carefully curated and easy-to-use guides that point visitors (and many locals) to independent, authentic and beautiful local businesses in Perth