

## **A Wise Investment: Supporting the Expatriate Spouse/Partner on Assignment in Asia**

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*The role the accompanying spouse/partner plays in a successful expatriate assignment in Asia frequently is underestimated and too often neglected.*

*Seng illustrates why providing support for the spouse makes good business sense.*

By Edmund Seng

With the need to develop global leaders amid the talent shortage experienced by many of the growing Asian economies, companies now are faced with both the challenge of attracting foreign talent, as well as the proverbial challenge of enticing their talented employees to relocate for expatriate assignments in emerging markets throughout Asia. While this may be a wise developmental move for the employee's career, what about the career and aspirations of the accompanying spouse or partner?

Besides the usual considerations that accompany an international assignment, family concerns are of paramount importance for employees today and this seems to be increasing their reluctance to relocate or accept an assignment, particularly in Asia. To think that the expatriate assignment for such individuals would be a natural success given the right and appropriate remuneration and other "hard" benefits such as housing, education, hardship allowances, and the like may be too large an oversight on the part of the mobility manager.

Relocation support and, in particular, the importance of salient and "soft" benefits, often are ignored and too often underestimated when planning international assignments.

### **A Critical Role**

The accompanying spouse plays a critical role in both the acceptance and success of these assignments. Most families are dual income in this modern age, where both partners have largely successful careers and enjoy a certain quality of life. As such, to uproot the spouse or partner with a successful career—interrupting his or her career plans and reducing the combined income of the couple—can have serious consequences for the family and, therefore, should not be taken lightly. The right concoction of "hard" and "soft" benefits to buffer the negative effects of such scenarios should be considered seriously when designing corporate relocation policies.

Having made the difficult decision to relocate, Western and European families moving to or on assignment in Asia often are faced with various challenges in their transition. Besides the relatively drastic change in climate conditions, families also have to cope with different cultures, languages, and quite often a different pace of life.

Take Singapore as an example. As a multicultural nation consisting of myriad different races (Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Eurasians) and a distinct culture brewed from the unique blend of such a diversified mix, families who have relocated here often find themselves amusingly lost and confused during their initial transition phase.

While the expatriate employee quickly has settled into his or her new work environment, it often is a different scenario for the accompanying spouse or partner. Left to his or her own devices, he or she either blends in quickly or, more often than not, is left feeling isolated. To have a satisfying and fulfilling experience while on assignment in Asia, the accompanying partner must find something meaningful to do that promotes entry into the local culture and, if feasible, into the host country, and explore options for them to continue pursuing their career aspirations. This often requires local knowledge and support to assist in navigating the marketplace, making relevant connections, and easing the overall transition to the new country and culture.

## Personal Experience

I recall working with one such accompanying spouse who had a successful career as a practicing contemporary ceramics pottery artist in New Jersey. On her relocation to Singapore accompanying her partner (the expatriate employee), she was eager to start practicing again. Initial transitional challenges, coupled with the fact that contemporary ceramics pottery still is a rather new and unconventional art form in Singapore, called for a large amount of research to provide information and the necessary connections to this industry. At the time of writing this article, she is holding her first show with a local gallery, with more to come in the months ahead.

Another accompanying spouse relocated from Pennsylvania and seemed anxious and eager to continue her osteopathy practice. Her equally anxious partner (the expatriate employee) wanted her to quickly settle in so that he could get around to doing his work. As often is common, I soon found myself having to deal with both of their needs, expectations, and anxieties.

After asking more questions, taking time to listen to what they had to share and, more important, what they really wanted to say but weren't saying, a deeper issue surfaced. Interestingly enough, both parties had relocated a few times and both were at a stage of their lives where they wanted to adopt a more cohesive, macro, and strategic approach to their life and career journeys. Further meetings with this couple revealed that the accompanying spouse had bigger dreams. She had been putting on hold her lifelong vision of starting a truly integrated and holistic wellness center and she now felt the time was right for her to finally pursue this vision. She currently is writing her business plan and we are exploring the best possible options for her to start on this journey of realizing her true dream.

Yet another assignment comes to mind. An accompanying spouse who had a successful career as a pre-school teacher found herself on assignment in Singapore, where she had little knowledge of the pre-school climate and obviously no local network. Because her résumé was not appropriate for the local market, the process of transforming, re-packaging, and re-positioning her to potential employers was started in earnest. Her desire to secure a teaching position at a newly founded pre-school institution (down the road and within 10 minutes walking distance from their rented residence) certainly did not make the situation any less challenging.

After a much-needed makeover and even more personalized coaching on proper business protocol and local interviewing techniques, the spouse duly submitted her application to the pre-school of her choice and was offered a teaching position.

To this day, a quote from her partner (the expatriate employee) who had joined us for our first meeting still rings clear in my ears, "I'm so happy, I'd be happy. Then I can do a good job here."

HR and mobility managers may do well to take heed here. Underestimate the importance of the accompanying spouse/partner's transitional needs at the peril of your expatriate assignments. Keep him or her happy and you may find the chances for the success of your expatriate assignments are greatly enhanced.

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