

Expatriate spouses eager for career networking help

Only one-third of employed spouses find jobs when relocated with partners

By Nina Cole

Andrew Owen's spouse was relocated to Shanghai for her job.

Being British, Owen joined the British Chamber and the Brits Abroad group soon after arriving in the Chinese city. And he was lucky — his networking efforts resulted in him finding a one-year contract as a marketing manager at the British International School.

Too many spouses of expatriates are left to their own devices when it comes to managing their careers when they follow their partners on a relocation, and not many are as successful as Owen. While 90 per cent of spouses of expatriates were employed before relocation, only 35 per cent were employed after relocation to the host country, found a 2009 survey of 3,300 spouses by the Permits Foundation, a non-profit organization that supports expatriate spouses.

Why is so much human capital being wasted? The answer is clear when one considers the many obstacles to obtaining employment abroad including: visa restrictions; cultural and language barriers; lack of recognition of foreign qualifications; lack of available jobs; reluctance of local managers to employ transient expatriates; and preference for local hires.

Spouses who want to work must overcome all of these barriers and create a new professional network, on their own, while their partners are absorbed with long work hours and frequent travel on their new assignments.

Expatriate spouses whose employment relationships are interrupted for some time or completely put on hold lose an important aspect of their social identity. Most feel uncertain about who they have become in their new role as the spouse of an expatriate, and suffer from reduced self-esteem and increased psychological withdrawal. An unhappy spouse, in turn, increases the chances of an early return home, greater expenses for their partner's employer and more family upheaval.

Not surprisingly, spousal career issues have become the leading cause of employees refusing international assignments and are a leading cause of derailed assignments.

Despite this, international employers have been slow to offer spousal employment assistance. A few have taken an informal approach, such as providing referrals to job contacts at other companies, or a more formal approach, such as providing assistance through a career services or job search firm familiar with the local job market.

Only 18 per cent of 238 expatriate spouses I surveyed had received employment-related assistance from their partner's employer. Job-search assistance was the most common, closely followed by providing employment to spouses and annual spousal allowances in lieu of lost spousal income. Financial support for further education and other cash payments were also provided.

A smooth relocation process and effective relocation assistance enable spouses to start their job search more quickly and with a more positive, confident attitude, said many participants. However, they gave lukewarm reviews of the employment assistance they received and had many recommendations for employers that fall into six categories:

- networking information/assistance
- jobs (if the employer is large)
- career counselling

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- respect (acknowledgement of their desire to work and follow-through on vague offers of assistance)
- specific services such as payment of professional fees and visa assistance
- assistance in setting up a small business.

The most popular, specific suggestions included:

- lists of expatriate networking groups, spousal associations and employment agencies (preferably before arrival)
- a list of other Western companies using English-speaking staff locally
- a list of international schools and other English-speaking organizations providing services to the expatriate community
- providing access to websites for expatriate spouses, such as Partnerjob.com, with information on cross-cultural adjustment and job searches
- information on local salaries.

Finding employment as an expatriate spouse is not easy. The process can be long and it requires hard work, creativity, flexibility and persistent networking.

Global HR managers can provide valuable, but inexpensive, help in the form of initial networking assistance.

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Portable careers

10 tips for job-seeking spouses

Expatriate spouse guru and bestselling author Jo Parfitt is well-known for her books *A Portable Career* and *A Career in Your Suitcase*. Her top 10 suggestions to job-seeking spouses are:

- Consider hiring a coach or career consultant.
- Find your passions, values, mission and meaning.

- Assess your skills, talents, strengths and uniqueness.
- Discover what you want and need from a career at this stage in your life.
- Brainstorm the perfect portable career for you.
- Adjust your career to fit your current location and its opportunities.
- Do the research and learning you need to prepare for the transition and your chosen career.
- Create marketing materials (resumé, website, cards, brochures).
- Network to meet the people you will need.
- Make it happen by setting goals, staying motivated and developing the confidence you need.