

# Corporate Solutions for Trailing Families

By Mark Ridlen

In today's globally connected business world, more companies are struggling to maintain an effective and flexible workforce. Now more than ever before, companies can benefit by creatively supporting and managing employees and their families who work and live abroad. While the issues facing these ex-pats are well known and documented, companies are still learning how to assist the spouses and families of their employees who are relocated abroad.

This article addresses potential solutions for several common problems encountered by trailing family members.

## **Career Assistance**

Many of today's trailing spouses have put their career on hold to move abroad. In many countries it can be difficult if not impossible for the spouse to maintain a career or establish a new one. Perhaps more importantly, trailing spouses may face considerable challenges and anxiety when it comes to resuming their career back in the United States.

## **Potential Solutions**

Corporate relocation and human resource departments should work closely with the employee and spouse prior to the move. They should explore the trailing spouse's ambitions and career goals to determine if they can provide assistance. Some corporations offer as part of their relocation benefit package, services to assist the spouse/partner in exploring employment options or career enhancement opportunities in the host country so that those who wish to work may remain productive while abroad. These services may also help the employed trailing spouse secure a leave of absence from his current employer, and re-establish himself professionally upon re-patriation. As another alternative, the company might offer to pay the costs for the trailing spouse to pursue educational and personal enrichment.

## **Emotional Distress**

Moving overseas and adjusting to a new culture and environment is stressful for nearly everyone. It is not unusual for ex-pats and their family members to experience periods of depression, behavioral changes and marital conflicts.

## **Potential Solutions**

All prospective ex-pat employees and their spouses should be required to attend cross-cultural training prior to their move. This training should be provided by a third party and address both the country's customs, and the psychological and emotional challenges that a family is likely to face.

A representative of the corporation (preferably the employee's supervisor or a member of management) should contact trailing family members to address their particular concerns. This is also the perfect opportunity for an employer to acknowledge any sacrifices being made by the employee and trailing family members.

Counseling and financial assistance should be made available through a third party to address emotional and behavioral stresses. For example, a trained professional can be made available to all family members on an as needed basis.

## **Family Needs**

Although family needs vary greatly, everyone needs basic necessities such as health care, education, transportation and everyday personal services.

### **Potential Solutions**

Prior to the move, the company can determine if the family has any special needs. Resources should be provided to the family detailing answers to common questions about health care, security concerns, and educational and religious opportunities. And last but not least, are support materials addressing the everyday needs that may be taken for granted. Information on health care services, grocery shopping, banking, postal services, local transportation, and communication services such as telephone and Internet service is especially valuable.

Having a local representative on-site to answer questions and assist in solving common problems can enhance these solutions. The company might also provide a small fund to offset the family's costs of keeping in touch with relatives and friends. The provision of an Internet service would be particularly valuable, since this is likely to be the primary way in which ex-pats communicate with family and friends back home.

### **Communication**

Communication is the key to survival for ex-pats. While this may seem obvious, a common complaint among ex-pats is that once they have made the move to a new country, they often feel isolated and forgotten (especially the trailing spouse). Once the move is completed, the adventure is just beginning. Many families will encounter problems around health care issues, security, and the safety of the local food and water. But they do not always know where to obtain reliable information, much less practical assistance.

### **Potential solutions**

Corporations should consider designating an employee resource or department that serves as a contact for ex-pats and their trailing family members. This person or group would be available to help solve problems on an as needed basis. Expatriate family members should be strongly encouraged to use these services. In addition, this corporate group should proactively address issues that experience shows may have a quality of life impact on ex-pats.

In the global economy, an increasing number of families are experiencing life in another country. Making their lives easier and more fulfilling should be a goal for all companies. Relocation support designed to address the needs of all family members can make the difference between a successful and unsuccessful international assignment. This will not only help to attract and retain the valuable employees required for long-term success, but also make them more productive in their overseas assignments.

Contact the author at: [Mark.Ridlen@skynet.be](mailto:Mark.Ridlen@skynet.be)

Mark Ridlen is an ex-pat spouse living in Waterloo, Belgium with his wife and three children. He provides assistance to ex-pats moving to Belgium in his role as an international consultant for Ricklin-Echikson Associates (REA). Mark has a background in finance and is currently involved in numerous volunteer activities.