

## **RELOCATION IS A FAMILY GIG**

**BY GALEN TINDER**

In the last year about 800,000 US employees relocated from one part of the country to another at the request of their employer organization. A smaller, but ever increasing number ventured abroad for assignments of up to several years. Many relocating employees make a smooth transition to their new job. But for others, the adjustment to the new location can be rocky.

Information compiled by a New Jersey relocation-consulting firm tells a story of widespread family dislocations. Nearly 40% of relocating families experience problems adjusting to their move within the first year. Although some of these problems dissipate with time, others cause such distress that the transferred employee resigns. During the first three years after relocations, one-third of the 800,000 employees who were transferred quit their jobs. This is three times the number of resignations seen among non-relocated workers.

These failed relocations are costly to all concerned - the employee, the family and certainly the employer. The tab for the employer begins with the amount of money typically spent to relocate an employee, approximately \$50,000. When the expenses of training, position vacancy and replacement are added, failed relocations cost employers at least \$100,000 and sometimes up to \$200,000. With these kinds of numbers at stake, employers are taking increasing interest in making the relocation work not just for the employee, but for the whole family.

In our mobile society moving is accepted as a fact of life. We tend to downplay, or simply forget, that moving is physically and emotionally exhausting. Psychologists have ranked relocation as the third most stressful life event, preceded only by the death of a family member and divorce. But, while death and divorce are widely acknowledged as painful, the impact of moving on our well-being is scarcely acknowledged.

Relocation is stressful in numerous ways:

- Homesickness and missing of friends
- Difficulties adjusting to a different culture. (A man who moved from Connecticut to Texas observed that a move to Paris would have required less of a cultural adjustment.)
- We are torn away from the familiar and comfortable
- The myriad logistical tasks of adjusting to and settling in a new area
- Sheer physical exhaustion

- Marital strains
- Readjustment pains on the part of children
- Spousal unhappiness at the loss of his or her job in the old location
- Feelings of anger, sadness, depression and purposelessness

Of course, no employer can be expected to provide its employees with an entirely pleasurable and strain free relocation. But when so much money is spent on real estate concerns and the transportation of household goods, firms should want to protect their investment by expending a fraction these costs to help ensure that the move works for all family members.

What can the employer do? First, the employer can try to make the move a transition, rather than a wrenching jolt, by funding enough pre-relocation time in the new area for the family to begin making their transition before the actual move. This can be especially valuable for school age children.

Second, employers can help family members by supplying them with information about the new area that is tailored to their circumstances and interests. Often the information that a relocating family is supplied with arrives too early or too late or in such an unsorted deluge that it is more overwhelming than helpful.

Third, employers can assist families in educating themselves about some of the typical obstacles that tax the patience and the emotions of relocating families. This should include help in handling the psychological and emotional challenges that confront families in their first year after a move. Transition counseling can help families identify ways of maintaining and strengthening the family ties that are often strained at the time of a move. Many companies have Employee Assistance Programs that provide high quality, confidential and free short-term counseling to employees and their family members.

Finally, many companies have already found how important it is to provide the employee's partner concrete help with finding a job in the new location. With the dramatic increase in dual-career families, many partners of relocating employees have their own rewarding jobs and careers. When they have access to specialized career assistance as part of their relocation policy, they enjoy a far better chance of finding fulfilling and remunerative work. This success enhances the family's economic future, enables the spouse to continue her career and benefits the entire family's adjustment to the relocation.