

SPOUSAL EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE - THE ADVANTAGES OF DECENTRALIZED CAREER COUNSELORS

“Eluding the Recession-Bearing Grizzly”

by Tonya Foust Mead

In today's global economy employment opportunities are becoming an illusive goal, particularly in regions with high unemployment. Central and Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America, China and Africa immediately come to mind. This spring, economists started to question the merits of America's 'Goldie Locks' economy. The economies of neighboring countries, Canada and Mexico, are also under the threat of a slowdown after riding on America's coattails.

According to the International Labor Organization, approximately one-third of 3 billion potential workers are unemployed, under-employed or subsist on annual wages far below the poverty line. As a human resources manager who shepherds hundreds of highly skilled and educated expatriates through strategic international human resource policy, you may ask, "What does this have to do with me and my workforce?"

More than likely, accompanying partners of your expatriate executives are multi-degreed and equally qualified. However, after relocating internationally, they are forced to compete with host country citizens who possess several advantages.

1. They are fluent in the language and know the linguistic nuances and expressions.
2. They have amassed a lifetime of contacts and family connections that will heed their call for assistance as they pursue gainful employment in a tight market.
3. They know the political, social, economic and cultural landscape. They are experts in navigating their way around tough situations.
4. They have no inherent self-esteem concerns that accompany an international relocation.
5. They act with self-assuredness, confident of the rules of the game.

How can we guide expatriate partners to the calm, still waters in the midst of the chaos encircling them?

Generalized employment assistance may not be adequate. It may add to the frustration and disillusionment of accompanying partners, possibly jeopardizing the success of an overseas assignment. Locally-based career counselors are the best defense against the threat of early departures.

Local Consultants Can Customize the Job Search Appropriate to Host Country Culture and Norms

The resume is often the first contact a potential employer has with an applicant. Typically, corporate personnel give each resume about a 10-20 seconds cursory glance, and then discard those that are disorganized or too wordy and file the rest. About 1 to 2 resumes out of 100 actually result in an interview.

Local career counselors have expertise in preparing 'host country' resumes and cover letters. They know the local job market. Counselors are well versed in the local language and job search protocol. While one to two page resumes are common in the United States, ten page curricula vitas are not uncommon in Europe. In Europe and Latin America, personal data such as age, sex, marital status, number of children and even the names and occupations of an applicant's parents are included.

Counselors Have Local Contacts and Networks for Employment Assistance

Many job opportunities are never advertised. It's been estimated that more than half of the positions filled are through an informal network rather than formally advertised. The 'Hidden Job Market' can only be accessed through networking, cold calling and informational interviews. Locally - based career counselors have a storehouse of contacts -- government officials, employment officers, 'movers and shakers', plus a cadre of locally-based expatriates in their private address book.

At REA Career Services, a career consultant in Colorado, Sara L. reports, "I referred a client, gathering information about a new career field, to a personal contact in the Denver community who works in that field. Although it's not a job requirement, I go out of my way to use my personal network for the benefit of

my clients. Additionally, I've introduced two clients from England who live in Boulder and share common interests. They would not have had the opportunity to meet, had I not made the introduction." According to Richard Nelson Bolles, author of *What Color is Your Parachute?*, one in every 200 resumes results in a job offer. More effective, however, is the informational interview, where one out of every 12 informational interviews results in a job offer.

Knowledge of Events Affecting Search and Appropriate Action and Reaction Advice

Although it is illegal in the United States to ask an applicant questions related to sex, age, race, religion, national origin or marital status, or to delve into an applicant's personal life for information that is not job-related, such questions may be the norm overseas. Responding to, asking and answering personal questions demonstrate the ability to create rapport; a skill valued in the US, but, perhaps more so overseas. Local consultants are aware that some components of the interview typically includes current events and fast-breaking news headlines. The career consultant is capable of reviewing potential topics (electoral candidates, political scandals, entertainers) for small talk and offering scripts for acceptable action and reaction to tricky questions.

Experience Dealing with Local Vendors, Medical Professionals, Schools, Government

Counselors have on the ground experience with the locals. Karen M., an REA International Consultant, in Germany, had these words to say, "I believe it is so important to have counselors located where clients are relocating because the counselors are personally current with what is happening. The changes that have occurred in Germany over the past 12 years alone are amazing -- politically, business-wise, geographically, even shopping (extended store hours, convenient ready-to-eat foods, large Wal-Mart type operations.) These changes have contributed to a different way of life and attitude that someone who may have lived here 20 years ago would be surprised by."

Possession and Awareness of Host Country Life Skills Relayed to Client

To succeed internationally, whether as a non-working or working partner, requires assimilation to the host country's culture. Employers place a premium on dress, manners, effective body language and the subtle rules of knowing precisely what to say and do in a given situation. While an interviewer reaches a decision about the applicant within five minutes, it only takes seconds for the interviewer to determine whether an applicant should be considered further as a candidate. Local counselors understand the norms, mannerisms, and customs and can alert their clients to international taboos and inform them of the life skills required to achieve one's objectives.

Certainly, it is not appropriate to label or generalize cultures. However, it's helpful to recognize cultural differences when interviewing or conducting business in a foreign country, as reported by Business Travelogue. The Finnish are introverted and shy. Germans find it difficult to act casual and relaxed among strangers. Japanese think it's crude to publicly show aggression. Indonesians take pride in nepotism. Mexicans are relaxed about time. The French respect privacy and value politeness. Brazilians find it a challenge to maneuver around stiff government bureaucracy.

This information may serve as trivia for the non-global worker or stereotypical for the intellectual, but for the relocated expatriate, spouse and family, awareness of such differences can be the determinant factor of overseas failure or success.

Partner / Family Transition and Adaptation Assistance

It takes more than one-third of new executives a full year to adjust in their new position for a domestic relocation. International relocations are indisputably more difficult. Cross-cultural adjustment, particularly for partner and family, may be the key to how well an expatriate performs on his or her global assignment. Locally-based counselors may be available to ease the transition from a stable and predictable life stateside to an unpredictable life abroad. Trips to the local supermarket or post office can prove overwhelming for the non-suspecting. School choice, socialization of accompanying children and community activities represent just a few of the areas of service. There are many instances where

counselors directly assist with emergency daycare, hand delivery of resumes and recommendations of appropriate after-school activities for their client's children.

Susan Ginsberg, the Director of International Services at REA states, "We have Career Consultants worldwide covering over 40 countries with 11 different language capabilities. Although our Consultants are locally-based, our support system and research is centralized to ensure consistent service delivery."

Recalling his own personal relocation experience, the arsenal of firepower value-added services that a local counselor brings to the expatriate and family war chest is best summarized by Kevin M., an REA Consultant in Tennessee. "We did our own research (relocation from Mexico to Israel) and we heard a lot on the television news and newspaper, stated Kevin. However, it was our local counselor in Israel that gave us the complete and accurate knowledge -- that is the "real deal". This assistance gave us incredible power to make the right choices and decisions regarding our lives and career changes."

Ultimately, deftly executing the corporate benefit that empowers accompanying partners to make the right choices, and actively supporting the expatriate and family, sums up the role of the locally-based counselor.

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