

The Expatriate Observer

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Tackling the Challenges of Family Adaptation: Find What You Need

Jody Mousseau

Embarking on an international assignment can be exciting as it provides an opportunity to live in a new place, experience a different culture, and perhaps even learn another language. It also offers the expatriate a chance to become familiar with other parts of the business, develop a new skill set, and prepare for future opportunities. However, as expected, embarking on an expatriate assignment is not without challenges.

Adapting to any new place, especially one with a different culture, involves difficulties. You have packed up your belongings, maybe shipping some and putting others in storage. You have probably rented (or sold) your house and moved to another part of the world. This process can become an even greater adventure, as well as a greater undertaking, when family members come along. One of the most common reasons that expatriate assignments fail is because the family—spouse/partner, child(ren), or all—is unhappy in the situation, often due to trouble in adapting to the new environment.

Sending an employee on an expatriate assignment is a significant cost for any company, and various expenditures (e.g., housing, tax) make assignments much more expensive than filling the overseas position with a local hire. Consequently, most companies take various measures to ensure the success of expatriate assignments—for example, a pre-assignment visit to the host location, cross-cultural and language training, destination services at the host location, education consultants, and other local resources to help the expatriate and family



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assimilate into the new location. However, it is important that both the company and the expatriate follow through to ensure that the family fully takes advantage of these programs and services, as the success (or failure) of the move often depends on a combined effort on the part of all players.

BE PROACTIVE, ALWAYS

Although the time spent preparing for, and then relocating to, an international location may seem to be a whirlwind in which transferees find it hard to settle in, this period is critical for getting the acclimation process off to an effective beginning. To ensure this result, the expatriate and all accompanying family members should take advantage of the resources provided by the company, including destination services and any applicable cross-cultural or language training (see sidebar on page 2, "Success and Failure Is Often Up to You").

The “honeymoon” period at the beginning of the assignment is that sweet time when everything that is unfamiliar is considered fascinating and interesting. However, after this feeling wears off, transferees need to effectively adapt to their new surroundings—or face potential problems. The following critical factors can help expatriates adapt quicker and with fewer challenges to the new environment:

- *Get a clear idea of the host environment before making a decision to relocate.* A pre-assignment “look-see” trip can be overwhelming, particularly if there is pressure to make a decision by a certain deadline. However, it helps to go on this visit with adequate preparation so that the ultimate result is an informed decision. Find out as much as possible about different aspects of the host location from as many varied sources as possible. If there are uncertainties, be sure to clearly communicate your misgivings to management about any host conditions that might cause your family particular difficulties regarding health, physical danger, and so on. And if possible, discuss the host location with expatriates either on site at the moment or who have lived there in the recent past.
- *Participate in available training.* When possible and applicable, the expatriate and accompanying family should participate in cross-cultural and language training to become familiar with the host environment, not only prior to, but also during the first few months of the assignment to refine whatever skills may have been gained. As these resources are not provided by all companies, it is important for all who are going overseas to take the initiative to learn as much as they can about the culture and traditions on their own, including the language if their native tongue is different. Awareness of cultural nuances can help avoid potentially embarrassing situations.

- *Take advice from contracted destination services and educational consultants.* These experienced resources can help families settle into a new environment, with consideration of their specific needs. It is important to heed the recommendations of reliable vendors, as they have likely assisted other expatriates and their families with similar circumstances.

Success and Failure Is Often Up to You

Expatriate assignments often either succeed or fail based on the expatriate's and family's ability to adapt to the host location:

- A U.S. expatriate moved with his wife to a remote location in Russia. As they had no children, the wife agreed to accompany her husband. The first thing they did was to become familiar with, and speak to each other in, basic Russian. Although neither of them knew the local dialect in the remote region, they endeavored to network with people from the local area, some of whom spoke little or no English. Their initial familiarity with common Russian, together with daily interaction in dialect with local merchants, helped them manage to communicate somewhat effectively—and even exchange some basic English with the locals. Without these ongoing efforts, and much patience, transition into life in that remote location would have been much more difficult, if not impossible.
- After moving from Peru to the United States, an expatriate and his wife began the task of looking at neighborhoods. In searching for a suitable area that offered the right type of education for their two school-aged children, they did not follow the recommendations of their contracted destination services or educational consultant. Unfortunately, the children experienced various problems, which resulted in their inability to keep up with the curriculum, thus stressing and alienating them further from their classmates. Consequently, the family relocated to a different neighborhood and school, causing a great deal of turmoil and disturbance for the family and adversely impacting the expatriate's work performance. Even though the new school was an improvement, by that point the children were so unhappy that the expatriate agreed to cut the assignment short.

**Managers, mentors (if any),
and local contacts may be able to provide information
about useful individuals or organizations.**

- *Network at the host location.* Also important to the acclimation process is having a network for the family at the host location to provide supplemental information about neighborhoods, schools, shopping, recreation, and other facets of daily life. Comprised of locals, other expatriates, or both, this network of friends and/or social groups is especially important when the spouse is not able to work in the host location.

Expatriates and their families who experience difficulty in adapting to a new environment should also speak with management about their problems. Managers, mentors (if any), and local contacts may be able to provide information about useful individuals or organizations to help resolve their difficulties in a practical, satisfactory manner.

THINK—AND ACT—POSITIVE

Although an expatriate assignment is not always an easy transition, particularly in cross-cultural situations, it can be a wonderful adventure. There are undoubtedly challenges in relocating an entire family, but these new experiences can be interesting and beneficial for all if the family takes a proactive stance and makes a commitment to adapt to the new environment by using all available resources—either provided by the company or the product of the expatriate’s own research.

Jody Mousseau, a consultant in ORC Worldwide’s international compensation practice area, is based in New York.

Cryptogram Equation

Solve the following definition and equation by substituting letters. *Hint: O = A.*

OKAZFL FPPHPH VF LTP OYYVUFKPFL BADOLVAF VF BADOB DZSSPFDX

QAS UAAHY OFH YPSIVDPY =

TAKP-DAZFLSX YRPFHOJBP VFDAKP

+ UAAHY OFH YPSIVDPY HVQQPSPFLVOB

=

OYYVUFKPFL-BADOLVAF YRPFHOJBP VFDAKP

x PCDTOFUP SOLP

(Answer follows on page 9.)