

**Career and Work-Life Issues for Expatriate Accompanying
Spouses or Partners: A Brief Survey**

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by

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In today's global economy, international relocation of employees affects companies, their employees, and employees' families. When an employee relocates internationally dual career issues are often critical. For example, Yvonne McNulty¹ found that more than half (54%) of the 264 respondents to her survey were concerned that relocation would jeopardise their career. Of the 3300 participants in the recent study by the Permits Foundation², fewer than one in five (16%) indicated that they did not want to work while in the host country while accompanying an international employees in the role of spouse or partner.

This report summarizes the views of a group of individuals who volunteered to share their experiences of career and work-life issues as an accompanying spouse or partner. The information was gathered via a short online survey, distributed in November and December 2009 in preparation for a workshop planned for annual Families in Global Transition Conference. The survey invitations were distributed via personal contacts and postings to LinkedIn Groups (Trailing Spouse and Families in Global Transition) and Blogs written by expatriate authors.

Since the participants' own words convey their views most powerfully, the report includes participant's comments presented in summary tables.

Who participated in the Survey?

Survey participants were asked about their current employment status, and an optional question about their age and gender. Group demographics are summarized next, followed by the findings regarding employment status.

Age and Gender

Forty-seven people completed the survey. Of those who chose to answer the question about gender, 29 were female and 3 (6.5%) were male. The group included people from a wide range of ages, and thus presumably at different phases of their career. The largest number (44%) was in the 35-44 age range. The next largest group (20%) was in the 45-54 age range. Approximately one in ten (11%) was 35 years or less, and the smallest number (5%) was in the 55 years or over age range.

Employment Status

Participants were asked to describe whether they were employed (full-time or part-time), self-employed, and whether they were looking for work now or in the future. An “other” category was offered for individuals whose status was not reflected in these categories. See Table 1 below for a full account of participants’ descriptions of their employment status in their own words.

Overall, equal numbers were employed (10.9% full-time and 10.9% part-time), and self-employed (21.7%). Seven people indicated that they were currently looking for work, and an additional two individuals reported that they would be looking for work within the next two years. The number of people who checked the “other” category (28.3%) indicates the variety and complexity of the work-life experiences of members of this group, including the restrictions resulting from not having a work permit or visa.

Although this survey did not ask about employment status before relocation, a recent study of 3300 spouses and partners by the Permits Foundation ² found that most (90%) were employed before expatriation, but about one-third (35%) were employed during the assignment.

Table 1 Participants' Descriptions of their Current Employment Status

Current Status	Participants' Descriptions
<p>Visa/Work Permit Restrictions</p>	<p>Not employed and cannot work due to visa restrictions I do not have a work permit I would desperately like to work but visa restrictions prevent me from doing so legitimately.</p>
<p>Caring for Dependents</p>	<p>At home with two kids</p>
<p>Unpaid work and volunteering</p>	<p>Am not employed but trying to establish my blog and do freelance writing I am "volunteering," with a stipend due to the difficulty obtaining work permits for foreigners, although this year, I was able to find something in my field Doing volunteer work for a foundation I started, so self-employed without income; combining this with study I am writing - both for pay and voluntarily. Is that self-employed? Whatever it is, it's a new path for me - and I'm excited about it! Volunteer work only- fundraising for NPO, tutoring, PTA</p>
<p>Preparing to work/Open to Opportunities</p>	<p>Not employed and not looking for work up to now, but if a "possibility" appears....I'm ready now! Not officially working but doing all what I can to get a career started</p>
<p>Challenges maintaining professional licensure & credentialing requirements</p>	<p>Not employed due to visa restrictions. Looking for volunteer opportunities that can give me credit for hours of work as a physical therapist required to keep my Minnesota State license to practice physical therapy</p>
<p>Self-employment, free-lance or consulting work.</p>	<p>Just started working freelance, am still in the build-up phase Not employed but in the process of starting my own business Short term consultancy (3 mo). Took me 18 months to find one!</p>

Fixed-term contract & Temporary work	Employed full time in a 12-month fixed-term contract role I looked for 1 1/2 yrs for a job - locally employed - and finally succeeded. From January 2010 on I'll have a temporary job in the admin. That is fine with me; I do not want to work full time because of my other hobbies
Education	Currently pursuing post graduate studies Went to uni. to work on career change, one that is more international recognised than a medical degree
Combine work, family, study, etc.	Run a full time business part time, run a full time child full time, support a full time travelling and busy partner full time, study part time, socialise and expand social and expat. networks regularly.....tired?

As the Accompanying Spouse or Partner, How did Participants View the Impact of International Relocation on their own Career?

The majority (85%) reported that their own career development had been affected by relocating internationally in the role of accompanying spouse or partner. Three individuals selected “no” as the answer to this question, two were “uncertain”, and one selected “not applicable”. In response to the follow-up open-ended question (Describe any changes to your work environment and how you feel about them) the following themes were discussed. As you might expect, the responses indicated a range of different experiences both positive and negative. The full account of participants’ comments in their own words is presented in Table 2 below.

- Overall a positive experience
- Deciding to make partner’s career a priority
- Career break and/or opportunity to pursue other interests
- Able to transfer skills
- Work in a different field and/or “non-career” jobs

- Obstacles to maintaining licensure and/or continued professional development
- Underemployment
- Time “lost” in starting over
- Loss of income
- Reduced opportunities
- Concerns about employment on re-entry

Table 2 Participants’ Reports of the Impact of Relocation on their Own Career.

Impact of Relocation on Career	Participants’ Comments
Increased and/or new opportunities	Our move to Singapore gave me the opportunity to start my own business - it gave me the freedom to find our fantastic home, set up our social life and plan our wonderful wedding. If I would have been working for an employer I might not have taken the liberty to get my personal life to a place where both me and my husband are very happy.
	Very positive
	It provides me with new opportunities to use the skills and experience of the past 30 years in other ways and other groups of people. And I'm hoping that he'll make enough money to permanently free me to pursue my passions w/o having to think about a paycheck.
	For me it has been a positive situation all along. I continued to climb the career ladder and learned more in one year in my new job than in 5 years in my old one. I then had the opportunity to complete masters degree 1 and now am busy with masters degree 2 - all whilst being a "trailing spouse". A woman has 3 distinct career phases: Pre-kids, kids, after kids. I am at the kids phase now and again one can 1) do nothing 2) study to prepare for phase 3. 3) art and craft, bake and sell and 4) be actively involved with the kids and greater

	community. I chose 2 and 4.
Employment break	I am happy to have a rest after tough 10-year working. I am happy to be housewife currently.
	Due to visa restrictions, my professional life has been on a volunteer basis, but I have thoroughly enjoyed being released from punching a time clock. I appreciate this gift of time to do other things.
Made partner's career the priority	I stopped working to follow my husband 8 years ago. I really loved working but we receive a good proposal and I realised his career was more important so I decided to support him. I lived in Brasil for 7 years and now I'm moving to Australia, Melbourne.
	I ended my career as an investment banker when our daughter was born (almost 10 years ago) partly because life with children would not accommodate two big careers and international mobility without our marriage or our child(ren) suffering. I was ready for a change anyway as I was disillusioned with the industry and company I was working for so it made sense for me to make the change. Another child and 4 international moves later I am trying to build a career that works for me.
	We knew coming overseas that obtaining a work permit for both of us was impossible and it has been the case in most of the countries we have lived. There have been lots of under-the-table opportunities but I have largely been an at-home parent and volunteer.
Exchanged career for challenge of living abroad	The profession I am trained in I can't work in developing countries. But this was very clear to me. Before we left our home country my husband asked me if we should stay in order for me to follow up my career. But I found it much more interesting and challenging to live abroad.
Leave of absence from current employer	Since I do not have a work visa, I do not have a job here. Fortunately, I could take a year off, so as soon as we get home, I can start working again at my previous job.

Issues of licensure and continuing professional development	Military always on the move, hard to continue education and work in career field where career field not as justified overseas as stateside.
	It's much more expensive to continue to gain college credits here. With a break in work due to moving relicensure is necessary.
	Before our assignments I had a very rewarding and well paid job, in fact I considered it to be my best job ever. I was also studying for professional exams. However, my line of work is Human Resources. One country that we moved to restricted employment in this field and reserved it for nationals only, and now it is impossible to get a work permit as the government make the process impossible to get through - they actively discourage engagement of spouses (in India) and this has been reported in the national press. In addition, my professional studies have faltered. I was doing the CIPD Masters programme by flexible learning. You have to attend monthly workshops which obviously I was unable to do. I tried to bunch these workshops into a period of a month but it was not possible. The CIPD make it very difficult to obtain their qualifications without attending study sessions (this is in the UK). Even the Open University does not offer a fully accredited distance learning option - but they would allow me to sit exams at the British Consul offices. A no win situation.
Dependent care as an additional factor	I left a HR specialist career. My specialism is employment legislation and relations. 8 years out of that has left a huge gap in my knowledge and up to dateness. I look at how colleagues at the time careers have progressed and I know having taken 8 years out I'm not going to get back without lots of work to the same level now and then. His organisation gave me a small allowance each year to undertake education/retraining - difficult to use when you live in a country where your language is not the first language and you are sole child carer and have no support system nor family available to help out
Non-career activities	My spouse contract doesn't allow me to officially work in the host country. Getting a work permit is a long and difficult journey. We are often posted for 2 -3 years (whitch is the time to get a work permit!). Since we are in expatriation for more than 20 years, I always manage to find activities and small jobs, but not

	necessarily the ones that would build a career.
Break from career	For the first 10 years of being overseas I didn't work, mainly through choice but also circumstances (lack of visa, language, opportunities) but I did a lot of volunteer work which helped build my resume. The last 3 years I worked part-time initially then full-time.
Profession transferable	I am a teacher so could substitute in all of my children's schools.
Working in a different field	I feel lucky to have a job that I enjoy, but it only loosely relates to my career field.
Start-over and Time involved	We have made two international moves. Both times, it took me a few months to settle and find any employment/ start a small business from home. Then it took up to a year to find a job that was more in line with my interests and career. Also, as a local hire, it was hard to find a job that would pay what I felt I deserved. I felt as if I started over with each move.
Under-employment	Went from part time to full time as no such thing here in UAE and downgraded to teaching aid from 20yr professional teacher.
Reduced income	I used to work full time as Financial Planner and gave up a very good position in order to relocate with my husband and son to the US. I have currently a lower income that I ever had before.
	My husband is a diplomat. We move every 3 years. I have, thus far only taken part-time positions at a consistently lower level than when I worked full time. With each relocation, I quit 2 months before moving, then nearly 2 months on home leave/re-entry, and then up to 6 months finding my next lower-paying position.
Qualifications not recognized	have not been able to work in new country, qualifications are not recognised

Reduced opportunities	We live in Birmingham where marketing roles are few, and candidates are many. The competition is fierce with a non-city salary on offer.
	I was an editor of educational materials back 'home' in Australia and I'm finding it very difficult to find any form of editing and writing work in Singapore.
Concern about re-entry opportunities	I had to stop my career as lecturer, learned many new things and became more enterprising, but struggle to keep up my academic interests. In career terms definitely a step backwards, but I don't (always) care about that. Not having completed my PhD in those years makes re-entry on the local market at home difficult.
	My career is dependant on what kind of working permit I can obtain in the country we are in. Normally an international role which a local person could not do. So this narrows my work options.
	When my spouse gets relocated overseas, I am faced with two choices: Either give up my job (unless we are able to plan for a place where we can both be posted by our respective organizations, unlikely at best), OR settle for a long-distance relationship. With the first option, I find myself starting over. With the second option, I need to make time away from my job to be with my partner. Either way, career development is affected compared to "conventional" couples. The feedback I have received from more than one head-hunter is that the number of relocations I have made, for PERSONAL reasons, has adversely affected the competitiveness of my CV.
The Challenge of "unpredictability"	<p>Although I was aware of the issues and always made strategies for the next step, things never worked out the way I had planned. I would do things differently, if I would start this Expat-life again. However, I learned to adapt and to deal with the unexpected. Am currently doing training for becoming a certified Intercultural Business Trainer/Moderator. One of my topics will surely be spouse support. I learned a lot and bottom line - although my career turned out differently and perhaps less money-making than if I would have stayed home - the process is interesting.</p> <p>Don't want to hide that it takes a LOT of initiative, enthusiasm and that it is hard at times. One problem is that companies cut back on expat. benefits (pension schemes etc.) constantly. It is not fun, to think what a bad deal it had become by now, to follow my partner. HR departments must be made more aware that this could cause a major shift in their ISE strategies. Nowadays, both partners are expecting to have careers. With the constant cost-cutting, they might attract the younger, less experienced Expats. (for CV reasons) but no longer the more experienced ones who are thinking further (again, e.g. pension is a big issue).</p>

Made family priority over career	It affected my career because I needed to quit my job which I like. However, living together as a family is much more important than my career.
Loss + New Opportunities	I am a social worker and had to leave behind a rewarding position, but have had the chance to expand my skills and broaden my career path.
Self-employment	I became self employed

Satisfaction with Current Situation Regarding Career and Professional Development

Respondents were asked to think rate their level of satisfaction with their situation with regard to career and professional development. One in four (25%) of the group were satisfied, and approximately one on eight (12.5%) were very satisfied. Just over one-third of the group (35.4%) reported that they were somewhat satisfied. More than one in five were dissatisfied (22.9%), and fewer than one in twenty (4.2%) were very dissatisfied.

Participants were also invited to say more about their “sources of satisfaction or dissatisfaction” by adding comments. Table 3 below summarizes these comments in participants’ own words. The issues reported included:

- career “on hold” different career and/or lateral move
- change in roles and balance within the family
- need for career re-assessment and/or re-start
- dealing with the experience of financial dependence
- limited opportunities
- need to be pro-active
- loss of earnings
- concern about future prospects

Table 3 Participants' Comments on Sources of Satisfaction & Dissatisfaction with Current Situation Regarding Career and Professional Development.

As we have moved to further my husbands career, my career development has been put on hold for family reasons and to accommodate his long hours and travel requirements. There is less balance between the two of us as regards or professional development.

Work in school my kids attend which is has helped the settling process for us newbie expats. Finding it hard to sit back and watch others do job which I am capable of but don't want the full time pressure with 3 kids under 12.

I was an advertising Regional Account Manager for South East Asia, working in a MNC on blue chip brands. While I am happy to land myself in mid-management marketing roles with a decent salary and a good working environment here, I can't help but compare myself to my peers who are now Global Account Directors and travelling all over the world.

I am now in a situation where I need to do a reassessment of my career - decide to do a course for a career change or look for work with my current skills and experience.

I'm satisfied but am at the point where I am debating whether or not I should go for that MBA or if I should spend my time in acquisition of new clients.

Have given up my career for husband's.

Just moved for the 4th time in 5 years and only been able to work at career level in one country so far.

Not having a job affects me more than I expected. It is weird to be financially dependent, and the days sometimes seem too long.

My profession was originally developed in the US, which enables me to access many resources that I cannot get in my country. I can learn and do some research about my field so that I can contribute to develop the field when I go back to my country. What I am somewhat dissatisfied with my situation is that I am not working in my country to develop the profession. However, what I am doing now, which is getting information and resources about the profession and meeting the professionals to learn more about the field, would be helpful to mature the profession in my country in the future.

We arrived only 2 months ago - still need time to adapt, find a job or a place to study.

I have found a solution and am doing something I really enjoy so I am now satisfied. I can't compare with what I never had and so for now this is fine.

Satisfied about continuing education, not satisfied about where to gain employment opportunities for english speaking women in german, looking to follow through with psychology degree.

Stop working has been my personal choice, nobody forced me. We created our family (2 daughters) and I don't feel my life is not complete. But now, I think I'd like to have my "space", to restart an activity.

I feel that my opportunities are limited here. Whatever happens with me career-wise will definitely be something of my own doing.

I have loved being involved in my husbands professional life. I have loved being creative in keeping myself professionally attuned and current.

Ultimately, I would like to find a paying job with more responsibility, but my current situation is far more appealing than teaching English!

We have lived with uncertainty over our location for the last two years and I have felt unable to commit to a business. Now that we are finally in our new location (Belgium), I am frustrated with the time it is taking to sort through our move and all that comes with it to be able to take the time I want to move ahead. I have also found that, as I have been the non-working spouse for the last 10 years, more and more of our family's household and administrative tasks have become "my job" leaving little time for other things. Not to sound like a whinger though, I am starting to see light at the end of the tunnel and am optimistic that I will achieve more balance in the coming year.

My work is satisfying (I am a professor of management now, just started in my second career), but there is no direct benefit, other than experience which helps in teaching, from the many years I spent in industry. This has translated into my earning less than I should have been able to, compared to my peers.

As a cross-cultural trainer I have been able to use my teacher's training and knowledge from our 2 international assignments.

Consulting is a good opportunity, but it is unclear whether it is sustainable.

Frustrated about missing out on the academic side, lack of status and foreign experience not valued; satisfied with all the new things I learned (much more practical), which are valued in some circles.

Have many talents which helped me a lot living in developing countries, i.e. DIY (painting, plumbing, repairing in general), cooking, talking several languages; but I am not trained in them. At times I feel uncomfortable, because in my real profession I did not develop further: I just got the education and never worked in it. Now I am almost a "beginner" again; I could not work in it. In a nutshell: I am good at things I never learned, but (became) bad at things I studied for so many years and I spent a lot of money for my education at university.

Time in the present country has given me the opportunity to do some training and I feel this is the beginning of a career. The main problems remain the accessibility to work permit and also the uncertainty in term of the length of the stay. It is difficult to start building a clientèle and then leave as soon as it is build up! therefore I'm working more and more on international and internet contacts.

I am satisfied in that I have branched into a field I might not have if we had never moved, but I feel that my career progression has moved laterally more than vertically. Essentially starting over in each location has slowed my movement up the chain. Luckily I am young and I think we'll stay put a few years, so I have opportunity for growth in my current company, but I dread moving again, and hope to have a job lined up in a new location before moving.

Giving up my position as a Financial Planner was not an easy decision. Although I did never regret this decision, there are times where I miss my career. In order to work in my old position, all certifications would have to be redone as my licenses are not valid in the US. It took me a while to find my way in a new career (I am still at the beginning). It can be frustrating at times to start all over again. Although I see this as a great chance to do something completely different. As I changed over the years, this is my chance to change my career as well.

I am not in one location long enough to establish myself or commit to a more challenging career.

I don't have to go to work in an office every day.
I have a break from the immense responsibilities and pressures I had in an unhealthy organization.
I get to spend more time w/ my son.
I get to try new things that I didn't have time for before.

Lack of available accredited professional training that can be done via pure distance learning. I am doing courses in HR which will give me the knowledge for the Masters programme without the actual title or accreditation. I am concerned of my earning potential on repatriation. I am also concerned whether or not an employer will hire me.

I have to time now to study and be a backbone for the family. That also means that I stay very aware of current trends and global influences. I am a mover and utilise every opportunity possible.

As we are at the tail end of the expat life (Over 22 years) I am worried that my peers will be way ahead of me when I return to the USA and that I will not find work.

Zero support from spouse's employer, no recognition for qualifications, had to go to uni. to get local qualifications.

Now repatriated and don't know which end is up! Don't want/too difficult to return to my former career. What is my new one?????

I miss working at the level I worked at and at the demand level and miss being part of great team and working with some amazing people in a high fashion environment. I like having my own business that fits with all my own responsibilities but am dissatisfied that I can't devote the time I want to this business and all the ideas I have to develop it.

I had to think hard about my situation. I struggled a lot to reach a decision, and am so happy with it.

Most Desired Change to Work Situation

Participants were asked to name the “one thing” that they would change about their work situation. Table 4 below summarizes the responses to this question. The issues that were most frequently described were:

- pay, status, and recognition.
- some, more, or better opportunities for work
- access to a work permit or visa
- more professional social contact and networking opportunities

Other desired changes described included career progression, hours of work, more time and resources such as space and assistance.

Table 4 Responses to “If You Could Change One Thing, What Would it Be?”

Would like to have an office space outside of my home but cannot currently due to financial restrictions.
Having the budget to hire an assistant.
More dedicated time and space to write without interruption.
I'd have more time to focus on my goals and objectives.
To show career progression within part time hours.
Part time hours available.
Stability. Still not sure if we're staying home or will relocate again.
Better opportunity for career minded women
Have a strong customer-network.
Would like to have a way to systematically apply for consultancies in stead of having to hunt for them. Would like professional contacts.
Be allowed to work where we live. There is a huge talent pool of expat women who are wasting their professional careers. Countries could embrace and benefit from all this wasted experience if only visa regulations were lifted.
Find a job or develop (studying or similar) my personal skills

I would like to be in a full time, permanent employment, in a senior marketing role.

Find a suitable position quickly

Get a job

To have done a masters during my previous job.

Go to school to learn by certification not degree within a few months

To be pursuing a PHD in stead of another masters. But it is essential to combine two fields of interest.

Get internationally recognised/transferable qualifications (as before I just did this)

I like my work - I love my life. The uncertainty of where we will live in the next year (or even next few months) is sometimes difficult to deal with - this is a factor coming from my husband's work - which ultimately is affecting my dealing with my business.

I would like the ability to work, as it stands now, my visa does not allow me to work.

I would apply for a work visa and find a job.

I would like to work more

To have a fulfilling job.

Easy access to work permit.

I could look for a job which is not related to my field.

My location - I live on a small island and so networking is pretty difficult.

Would like to be paid for a little of my work! I wish I had taken the time to complete my master's degree though constant uprooting and settling has made it very difficult. I think my time is coming!

Better pay.

I would have more frequent and better paid assignments

I would love to work more / have more assignments.

Do it more often. This economy is slowing intl. assignments down.

Almost the ONLY thing I miss about living in the US and working regularly at my profession is the whole no-paycheck thing. I would love to be paid for doing the nothing that I am now doing.

I would love to do what I do now, but getting paid for it :-)

I would receive a salary - even if just a small one.

Earn more

More money and importance in the business world

I would be paid much better and be recognised more for what it is I'm doing.

I wish I were hired from abroad, and received the benefits of a foreign worker, not a "local hire."

Nothing

I just found a temporary job. Once you are in the business, others will surely follow. I am optimistic!

Make it easier to get re-established in a new country than really happens. After 22 years and 5 countries I know it takes 2 years to re-establish and another 3 to get earning up to the pre-move levels!

Find a job that can move with me. Unfortunately, this means working from home and missing a part of the buzz of getting up, getting dressed up, commuting rush, and co-worker connection that comes with being a "part" of the work force.

More in-person interaction with colleagues.

5 Advice to Other Accompanying Spouses and Partners.

Many expatriate accompanying spouses and partners relocate more than once, and may gain valuable knowledge and experience that could be helpful to their peers. One of the survey questions asked respondents to say what advice they would give to other accompanying spouses or partner. This yielded a rich amount of information. See Table 5 below for the full summary.

Areas of advice included:

- professional development
- employment
- preparation and planning
- developing self-knowledge
- need for creativity and flexibility
- importance of persistence and being proactive
- family communication
- access available resources

Table 5 Summary of Advice to Other Accompanying Spouses & Partners.

Focus on continuous personal development. I am always pursuing at least 1 new skill/certification

Make sure there is an allowance built in for 'classes/relicensure/retraining' within the relocation package.

Make sure that you can keep on going with some professional activities. This could be through work, but also through voluntary work, training,... Spouses need to be very creative in their way they approaches their professional lives. I also feel that making our jobs more international is important. We can than move with them

Try to stay in that posting for at least 4 years to establish yourself or work from home either on a telecommuting position with your previous employer or some form of "on line" home business or if it is for a limited duration, advance your credentials and follow some on-line study programs

Don't jump at first job opportunity offered however bored you are

If you are in a job with great prospects back home, use that to your advantage and ask for a transfer to their (where ever you are relocating to) office. It will makes your life and transition abroad a lot easier when you're in a new place, but have landed on your feet in terms of career familiarity.

Find a job, no matter what kind. It helps you adjust to and learn about the new culture.

Try to get a work permit.

Look ahead, research much, be willing to live off his income for a long period of time, and learn to speak german, fluently.

To be sure about their own wants and needs and to seek out opportunities before moving.

Be sure that following their partner is a free choice. If they want to continue working, it's extremely important to think about their own career and try to relocate themselves.

Think ahead- investigate options before arriving; be flexible. Be clear with partner what expectations are.

If possible, find a job from abroad, don't wait until you arrive in the new country. Get involved in your own activities and groups as soon as possible to make your own friends.

Prepare, make sure you know what you're up for. If you have a work permit check what you can do with your existing qualifications or prepare to study. If you are planning to relocate more frequently get international interchangeable qualifications. Or decide NOT to work at all.

Discuss with your partner, see what they think. Make sure they understand your position.

Don't close yourself off from new people, places and experiences. This is an open door for you, too. Walk through it with courage and anticipation!

Think very hard about it. It can be a very rewarding and enriching experience. If you have children it could be the perfect opportunity to spend more time with them which if you are currently working, you won't get. You will also meet and make friends much more easily if you have school age children. If you are childless and have your own career - think very hard. It can be lonely, it is more difficult to meet like minded people and friends.

I would suggest traveling to the location first and talking with other expats. (in person or online blogs) to get a true feel of what the country/new assignment will be like.

Be prepared to be overwhelmed by the supermarkets. Trying to locate ingredients that you might be use to having readily available take a while to find.

Also, people tend to keep to themselves here, not so easy to break into social settings or to meet new people.

To consider carefully what they want career wise and how flexible they are truly prepared to be. If they are set on one career path that is going to be very difficult in their chosen new location then they need to be very honest with themselves about the impact if not being able to pursue their chosen career.

Be realistic. It is not always easy to work in your old job in a new country. Study the language (if different from home country) if possible before relocating, find hobbies after arrival to keep busy and don't expect that everything will just come to you.

Find your passion, know yourself, know what you love, be flexible, learn to compromise

Take career counselling, or at least give some hard thought not only to what you will do on the assignment, but what you will do AFTER the assignment.

Beware of living life with eyes wide open but mind firmly shut. Life is fun, grab and create opportunities. IT is OK not to be working - there are many other ways to live a fulfilling life.

Readjust your expectations completely. Your new job description is to be the point person for settling the family. Know and expect that visa restrictions may limit your ability to work. See this as a gift of time in which you can celebrate other activities. Know that you will arrive in new location with no track record - no one knows what a wonderful person you were in your previous life (that's good if you weren't so wonderful!). See this as a clean slate to become someone you haven't had time to be before.

Absolutely put your family first. Let your spouse do the job he went there to do to the best of his ability. Take care of your family but be sure to nurture an area of interest for yourself. Find like minded folks to keep you interested and happy. Get involved. Learn the language. Make sure that you and your spouse have a mutual set of friends. If your marriage is sound you can get through anything.

Generally: don't think adventure only, think long-term.
Depends VERY much on the length of assignments and personal goals.

Don't hesitate to do the things which interest you; don't expect a clear time-frame for the posting, but start your own enterprise/ study/ job search straight away with your own time-frame in mind.

Go with it or fight it...

Be patient, flexible and open to new things. It can be very difficult to deal with the loss of identity that often accompanies the lost of a job or career path, especially when combined with the need to find one's niche in a new culture. Think about skills you have that might be used professionally to open other avenues, if work in your field is not an option. Also look into teleworking, or contract projects that can be submitted online to build upon or maintain your skills and experience. If you do not need to work, take the opportunity to do things you've always wanted to do with your free time - hobbies, activities, etc. Most importantly be sure you have a support network and establish a routine pretty early on that gets you out of the house/apartment and moving, even (or especially) if it is just to get to know your new culture and surroundings.

Be prepared to have a hard time finding a work position if you wish to pursue a career

Research A LOT prior to moving and if possible, obtain a notable professional contact or two in the new location PRIOR to moving that can hopefully assist with employment opportunities.

Keep sight of your own dreams and goals - its too easy when you move internationally to loose yourself in everyone else's needs and to focus on making sure that the children are settled, the house is sorted out etc. Go into the assignment with some specific things that you want to get out of your experience (career, personal development, social) and be selfish about getting there.

Be creative, be open to change and new experiences. Don't stop exploring opportunities. Also, your chances of finding a job increase if you study the local language.

Figure out what kind of opportunity this might be for you to grow as a person. It might not be job related. Consider all options including not moving with your spouse.

Look for the positive side and embrace the different way of life and experiences

Feel happy, cherish the time with family closely. You will get another job anywhere but you have only one family.

Plan very very VERY carefully. This will necessitate an absolutely frank and open discussion on how each partner will handle the huge professional pressures and the even huger personal pressures that relocation / long distance relationships will entail.

If there are children, then always remember that their needs come first.

Life is what you make of it! Communicate with your spouse, and try to agree if that is possible, on what you both need personally but also professionally - and do not hesitate to tell the other one when you have changed your mind.

Take it easy. It usually not like you expected it to be. Take your time and think what would you like to do with your career, What would be best for yourself and your family

Make a list of things I-always-wanted-to-do-but-never-had-time-for and start doing these things now!

You have to go out and make opportunities for yourself - expat. entrepreneurship will test you but does give you an outlet to express who you are in the world.

Make sure you have enough hobbies or rather dreams which you can make true, because you have then plenty of time. Think positive! What you learn from or in a life abroad you can never learn in your home country.

Take the time you need to find out what you could do at the new place, save enough money to survive a couple of months without income, try to enjoy the time at the new place. Besides looking for a job, it's important to have some fun hobbies (doing sports, going to museums, sightseeing, writing, doing crafts, ...). Do the things you always dreamt of doing, but never had the time to do so.

There are many spouses' benefits that the school offers, such as free/discount classes, social networking groups, writing center, and career development center.

It would be helpful to utilize those opportunities to make friends and search jobs.

Also, volunteering would be a good way to know people and culture, and continue to develop the career.

Get involved in expat. activities in your new city! Take language courses if you are moving to a location where you don't already speak the language.

Get networking. Go to expat. clubs and associations to meet a mix of people and find out more about the city you are in and which companies are based here, own business ideas etc

Once you make the decision continue on a positive track. There is something to learn everywhere you go. If you are timid/shy/introvert connect with an extrovert and go, go, go.....

6. Joining a Peer Group of Accompanying Spouses in a Similar Situation.

It is evident from previous research that even when relocating employees received support from their employers, this is seldom extended to their spouse or partner. For example the Permits Foundation 2008 survey² found that only about one in ten spouses or partners felt that they received adequate informational support for their career and professional development (information on local opportunities, network contacts or vacancy information, job search advice/guidance).

In an effort to learn more about the type of support that accompanying spouses would perceive as valuable, the survey included a question about what participants would want to get from a peer group and how they might contribute to such a group. Table 6 below summarizes participants' responses to this question in their own words.

Desired support included:

- career-related support including cultural dimensions of job search
- increased opportunities

- social contacts with others with similar experiences and in similar situations
- emotional support (“people do not roll their eyes”)
- access to and recommendations for resources
- networking opportunities

Proposed contributions included:

- extensive experience and learning from having been there and overcome the challenges
- practical help and information
- social and emotional support
- specific expertise (child development; author of career book; coaching; networking)

Table 6 Desired Support from and Contribution to a Peer Group of Accompanying Spouses

Open-mindedness

A shared sense of purpose to want to further your family opportunities. I could contribute experience of having relocated and ways to make connections within a new community.

Not sure as these new situations rob you of self confidence in all areas of your life.

I think I would like to give and hopefully, receive pointers on the realities of life abroad. What's the same, what's not, how things work in your new environment - and these can be as basic as holding a conversation or eating with the right utensils to salary and job expectations.

Friendships, find out more about what's going on, events.

Give my experiences of living and working abroad for the last 4 yrs. Now I'm not working and recently relocated again to a new city KL. I am a bit of an unfamiliar situation not used to not working and need ideas to fill my time constructively.

What I would want to get from it - good question - I am thinking of joining one here in Singapore - but found that some of the women that I've met so far were having such different intentions of joining this group. Some were very interested in selling their business to me while others were very specific in looking for friends to go and have drinks with. This just left me confused.

What I feel I can contribute - on social level I can be yr friend and on a business level I can be yr sparring partner.

Try to help one another. Do things like celebration US holidays together.

I have a tremendous amount of experience in education and child development; I'm certain that would be of benefit to someone.

Hear their work experiences. Share the woes of doing a job that is not in your field or not up to your skill level.

I would love a social setting, where a group can go out and perhaps do different things by night on a weekly basis. There is so much to see and do in Boston.

We should share different interests and experiences and try to find other talents besides the work.

I was a "work crayzer" before but not a happy housewife with flexible time. I finally have my own time to write articles I enjoy which was the dream when I was 10 years old. Working is not the whole life. I rest and think now, will work in the future.

Networking and social contacts.

Loads of experience and loads of contacts in various countries.

Friendships and advice.

I would like to share how people enjoy living in the different country and how they deal with frustrations

Talking about the new situation, meeting new people with similar problems and experiences, learning about the new culture. All these things help and it's good to get out of the apartment and do some things for your own.

Just to share experiences and offer support - especially in those early days when perhaps there are few friends in the new location. To share ideas and encouragement.

employment opportunities, support for deployed spouses and rational thinking, career minded individuals who also support other career minded women with families, with job search and recommendations for employment in similar career field.

I'd like to share feelings Being so far away from family and friends, we need to find a support; the group should give moment of fun, but also a place where interests, problems, solutions can be found. An helping hand, under several points of view. Newcomers need to find practical solutions but also (and it's very important) someone to talk about lots of topics, someone who can understand their feelings, how difficult is to start a new life. The group should be the place where people continue developing as human beings.

I am a member of 2 of these organizations. I love sharing stories, good and bad. I love affirming that difficulties are survivable (is that a word!). I love sharing how to cope and hearing how others cope. I love watching for new people arriving at our coffee mornings, seeing that glazed-over panicked look in the eyes, and being able to encourage that poor woman, sometimes too near the breaking point.

A) network, inspiration

B) network, inspiration, advise from experienced spouse

I would enjoy the companionship of people in similar situations as well as the opportunity to meet people from a lot of different backgrounds and experiences.

I could share my experiences.

I could probably contribute by offering spouse counseling

Positive reinforcement and support and innovative ways to work around the system. I'm not interested in sitting about and complaining about it.

Having made 7 international moves, I think I'd be able to contribute a great deal about the expat. experience in terms of helping people with less experience (the business I am setting up is aimed at coaching first time/inexperienced expats. on preparing themselves (organisationally in particular) for an international move. In terms of what I'd look to get out of a group is some advice from expats. who have set up their own businesses while on international assignments.

I think I would want to get:

- a) Information about opportunities
- b) Active networking and communication with other similarly-placed souls
- c) Possible chances to meet other people in the same situation.

I think I can contribute through:

- a) Sharing my own experiences and learnings
- b) Sharing info on opportunities I might have come across that would be of use to others.

Understand what we have learned and how we have grown without knowing it. Also understand the impact these assignments will have and have had on the parent/child relationship. I could help lead this discussion.

.Share resources re flexible job options.

I volunteered many years for such a group, which was very rewarding in terms of the support we could give each other (self-esteem and practical tips) and it gave me a lot of insight in my own situation too, but right now I'm too busy with repatriating (for the time being).

A more rewarding job otherwise I am not interested in hearing stories...I have been writing my own for 30 years

I am always looking for interesting people I can learn from; be it different languages, cultures, religions, cooking styles or just views/opinions. I would contribute my optimism for life abroad, what a privilege this is and challenging and rewarding.

Contacts, contacts, contacts... just making connections would be helpful either way.

Mentoring newcomers. I am the author of Career in Your Suitcase, I think I can help.

I would not expect return, but would love to help others - especially trailing spouses that are just at the beginning of their journey.

Based on own experience I could give tips and ideas how to succeed in the new country and can hopefully support them in finding their way. In my previous job as Relocation Coordinator, I helped the "trailing spouses" with all questions in regards to their jobs (explaining how different resumes are here in the US, how Interviews work, how the job market is, what possibilities they might have,

In my job, I work with other embassy spouses all of the time. As a community advisor on employment issues, I belong to several peer groups who, like myself, are accompanying spouses. Many of these become complaint sessions with few answers, however, it does wonders for the soul to realize you are not alone in your feelings. I try to add practical solutions, but even I have not found the "perfect" formula.

What I need: the companionship of other people who "get it", encouragement to overcome fear and keep moving when I get stuck, reality check (when I take myself too seriously or get things out of perspective), people to laugh with, friends for my son.

What I might contribute: empathy, practical advice and encouragement that comes from overseas experience and cross-cultural and other kinds of training.

It would be great. However, local peer groups tend to consist of those who are much older (50, 60) or those who have young children at school. At this stage of my expat. life I am disheartened of ever finding a like minded group.

I would like to participate in group discussions about all sorts of interesting issues - from how we cook as expats. to how we dress, walk and talk. How do we change, adapt and integrate? What has the impact been on our lives. Third Culture Kids. The internet and being an expat. and a million more topics.

I can contribute my energy and zest for life, my expertise as an Adult Learning Practitioner focusing on the impact of globalisation on our lives, my second area of expertise - Child studies and 3rd culture kids. I have a million things to contribute. It might be as simple as friendship.

I have been in this situation many times! I would want to learn how they handled repatriation. Honestly, I could offer SO much. I have moved to 9 countries in the last 20 years and raised our 4 children from birth abroad to launching the oldest two to college. I have dealt with everything from language to emergency evacuation, terrorism, ill family members, buying selling properties from afar and keeping my family whole simultaneously. I have often counseled families with difficulties on how to get through a challenging situation.

Learn from each others experience. Pick up tips on how to deal with the cultural differences, e.g. local CV and cover letter format, local interview format. Who to call, and what to expect. e.g. in our host country when recruiters or HR staff say they will call you back, don't hold your breath, because they won't. Keep chasing them.

Networking ideas, marketplace insights (e.g. what's selling from a consulting services perspective). I could contribute to the above based on my experience.

Mutual support. Ideas. Contacts. Many trailing spouses suffer from "identity shock" not just "culture shock." Who am I now? Am I employable? Will I ever work again? These issues for women are intertwined with "normal" life issues and stages suffered by all - availability of childcare, absences from the workforce due to childrearing, menopause, caring for elderly parents, etc.

Just to know that others know what I'm going through and aren't going to suggest x, y and z. They'll just know why it's hard, difficult, demanding, tiring and will be able to make some suggestions far more subtly as they know.

I'd contribute my coaching and networking skills

A feeling that there is someone who gets it, where I can talk about the expats. life and people do not roll their eyes.

I would expect to get and give emotional support, people and place connections, recommendations of known resources like books, websites, other groups.

Additional Comments from Participants

The final survey question invited participants to share anything else they wished about their experience. These comments are summarized in Table 7 below.

Table 7 Additional Comments

This is an opportunity to develop yourself and test yourself. You may not like all you learn or do but in years to come you'll reflect on what you have done and achieved and feel a sense of the opportunity being an expat. spouse brought to your life.

Having been a working mother prior to expatriation I have to say I don't regret dropping out of the workforce for a while. We could never have afforded it otherwise and it improved our quality of life as a family immeasurably. However getting back in is a struggle even for those who don't expatriates, living overseas adds a whole other dimension!

A frustrating thing is that medical degrees are not recognised, I never knew that people were build differently in other parts of the world.

A good insight was after being frustrated by the bureaucracy in the host country that I realised it is the same everywhere and that I just had to get used to the 'new' system of bureaucracy as I was used to it in my home country.

With things as telephone connections, things are called differently, but in the end you pay for the same. Difficult some times when moving to a country with an other language than your own. Even when you speak the language very well, you still encounter these things.

Good thing was to join an expat/newcomers group

This has been a journey of a lifetime. While I have at times been frustrated that US based peers make a high salary and have developed power careers I would change little. I recognize that I have skills that many folks never develop just from our experience. My challenge is knowing what to do with them now.

Sorry - but too much to write about. Lots of fantastic opportunities to travel and learn and a lot of frustrations.

I've lived in a lot of different places - but always had school or my own job to provide relationship, structure and satisfaction. It's very different as an "accompanying spouse". A lot lonelier. A lot harder to know how to find friends. And, as in all cross-cultural situations, it brings out one's "issues", personally and in your marriage. It can be an opportunity for transformation. But it can also be a very scary and potentially damaging journey without self-awareness, commitment to health, or outside resources.

On the positive side of things, I am not under huge pressure to conform to a career-track mommy lifestyle. I am home every day when my three kids come back from school and remain very involved in their daily lives without the feeling that I am not "contributing" enough or that I am "stepping out" of the work force. I work to keep my mind and skills up to date, not to help pay a steep mortgage or other trappings of a hard-charging dual-career family.

It is interesting to see that most accompanying spouses I know are not looking for a job or interested in working. Also, family and friends at home never thought that I might like to work. Why is that? Is it almost expected that the "trailing spouse" gives up his / her job and "himself"?

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Comments, Questions, & Information

You are invited to contact me directly to share your comments and questions. Please email if you are an accompanying spouse or partner, and would like to receive information about joining your peers in a work-life telephone coaching group.

Email: jb@careeroptionscoach.com