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Jill Hoffman, FSA, FCIA, is business development actuary at Munich Reinsurance Company - Singapore Branch. She can be reached at JHoffman@MunichRe.com.

Ex-pat & the Family

The questions of moving abroad

By Jill Hoffman

Congratulations! You've been offered a bright new shiny job overseas. A promotion! Housing allowance! Travel! But wait, what are you going to tell the family?

Taking a new job at home is most likely 90 percent about you and your career advancement. Taking a job overseas is 50 percent about you and your career and 50 percent about your family. There are a lot of hard questions that you and your family must face.

What does the new job mean for you? Will you be traveling a lot? Will you have to work a lot of long hours? Are you moving ahead of the family, so there will be several months of separation?

What about the package provided? Is it enough to maintain your current standard of living? What if you drop to one income? Do you have the cash flow needed for moving? While the company may pay for the move, they do not pay for the new bottle of ketchup you need on arrival or new TV due to change in electricity. As well, you will need cash for deposits; landlord, utilities, etc.

Does your spouse currently work? Will they want to work in your new location? Will they be able to? How do they feel about not working? Going from a working spouse to a non-working spouse is probably a harder transition than the actual move overseas. If they aren't working, will there be language issues? How will that be dealt with?

What about the children? What are the schools like? What is the environment like? Is it safe?

Can they play outside? What is the pollution like? Are there activities to do on the weekends? If you do not have children, is now the time to have them?

What about the extended family? How much do you rely on them for day to day help? Are they able to travel to visit you? How will the grandparents feel about you "moving the grandchildren 1,000s of kilometers away?" How will you feel about missing out on family events, like Thanksgiving, Christmas? What about your friends? You will miss milestones like weddings, births.

When I was living in the Bahamas, I remember a friend telling me I was "so lucky" to be living there. So I asked her if she would do it. "Oh no, I couldn't move away from my family. My husband would not be able to find work, so this would not be the right choice for me." So while I am "lucky" to have the opportunity to move abroad come my way, I am not "lucky" in my choice.

THE SPOUSE MAKES OR BREAKS THE ASSIGNMENT

I have always said that the spouse makes or breaks the overseas assignment. The decision to move abroad must be made jointly between you and your spouse (it is up to you if children get a vote). Imagine the situation from your spouse's point of view. You get to go into work, talk to interesting people, have lunch at new restaurants, travel, entertain and more or less have the same routine as at home.

Your spouse, especially if they have to stay at home, will most likely have to do all the work around the house with respect to the move,



“... the spouse makes or breaks the overseas assignment ...”

dealing with getting the utilities turned on, find the grocery stores, figure out what all the new food is, get the children to school, etc. Even if they had stayed at home before, this is a new challenge. Maybe there are language issues. Perhaps extended family helped out at home with some of the daily routine, and that help is no longer there. Trying to make friends can be difficult for the stay at home spouse.

Like with any change, there will be a cycle. At first, you both will be excited, the packing up and imagining your new life. Next, there is the arrival and the newness of everything. Then there will be a large drop in the excitement level, around six months. Nothing is like home. You miss your friends and family. It can turn into depression for some.

But you will bounce back. It is the level that you plateau back to that is important. If you or your family do not like living there, then exit strategies will have to be looked at. If the plateau level is high, then ex-pat living will be rewarding and fulfilling is for you.

CHILDREN

Children add an extra element of fun in everything you do. Often, people will start a family while abroad due to the fact that one spouse is more than likely to be at home, or it is just the right time.

Schooling is obviously a major concern when moving abroad, and your children will most likely have to attend private school. Some countries do not allow ex-pats to attend their local, government subsidized school. The private schools are often made up of people like yourselves, ex-pats from various places around

the world. Learning about different places, cultures and food is a given. Depending on the size of the local ex-pat population, you may be able to send your child to a school with a Canadian or American based curriculum. But maybe the British, French or Australian school would be a better fit. Many schools offer the International Baccalaureate program, to ensure some consistency as the children move around the world.

Children are also a great door opener for meeting people. Your new friends are the parents of your children's friends. If you have the time, you can get involved at the school, or organize play dates for the little ones in order to meet people.

Children can be more flexible than we give them credit for. Yes, regular routine and boundaries must still be there, but whether the bed is in Toronto, Singapore or Mumbai does not matter as much to a child as long as you provide them with love and the stability of the family unit. The core nuclear family bonds become that much more important and that much stronger when you are abroad, due to the shared experiences.

And a note of caution. It is easy to spoil children when abroad due to your own guilt. A child might state that they miss grandpa, and to ease your own guilt, you may buy them a new toy to cheer them up. This is not what the child wants. They want the reassurance that their feelings are valid and it is okay to miss grandpa, and you miss him as well. You do not want to raise ex-brats!

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ENJOYING THE ASSIGNMENT

There are ways to survive the cycle of excitement, depression and plateau. The first is to recognize it. Some people become neat freaks as they want to control their home environment as much as possible, as they may view it as the only place they can control. Others may spend their entire time on the internet in contact with friends and family back home. While contact to home is good, too much can prevent you from meeting your neighbours and experiencing your new life.

Try and meet new friends. Join an ex-pat club. Most places will have a Canadian or American ex-pat association. They are great places, as they have been exactly what you have been

through, people can give valuable advice, and they know where Winnipeg, Sacramento (or wherever you are from) is on a map. Another international organization I have belonged to in the past is the Hash Harriers. They are a self-described “drinking club with a running problem” and have local chapters around the world. And just start talking to people, now is not the time to be shy. The faster you get a social network set up, the easier your transition will be.

Life will be different than back home. Isn't that the whole point of moving abroad? If you open your mind and your heart to the possibilities and challenges, the ex-pat life can be very rewarding for the entire family. □

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