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Integrating In

By Jill Hoffman

In my last article “Ex-Pat and the Family” (published in *International News*, Issue 48, August 2009) I wrote briefly on enjoying the expatriate assignment. But how does one go about integrating in a new home? As I realize I do not have all of the answers, I asked a statistically insignificant, but emotionally significant group of friends and acquaintances how long it was before they truly felt settled. As a caveat, the majority of people I asked currently live in Singapore, which I think, is one of the easier ex-pat assignments as English is spoken here. However, my view was not necessarily shared by others as I soon found out. I also asked my working friends, so responses may be different for the stay at home spouses.

EX-PAT SMALL TALK

You are at a party and see a fellow ex-pat. A typical conversation will include the following questions:

- How long have you been here?
- Where are you from originally?
- Have you lived in other countries?
- Is your family here?
- Which school are your children attending?
- What do you do and who do you work for?
- Where in the city do you live?

Of my 20 friends that I asked, here are some of their answers:

- Six of them have been in the ex-pat country for over five years, the majority have been here longer.
- The ex-pats that I have met in the actuarial circle are from Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland. In Singapore, the oil and gas

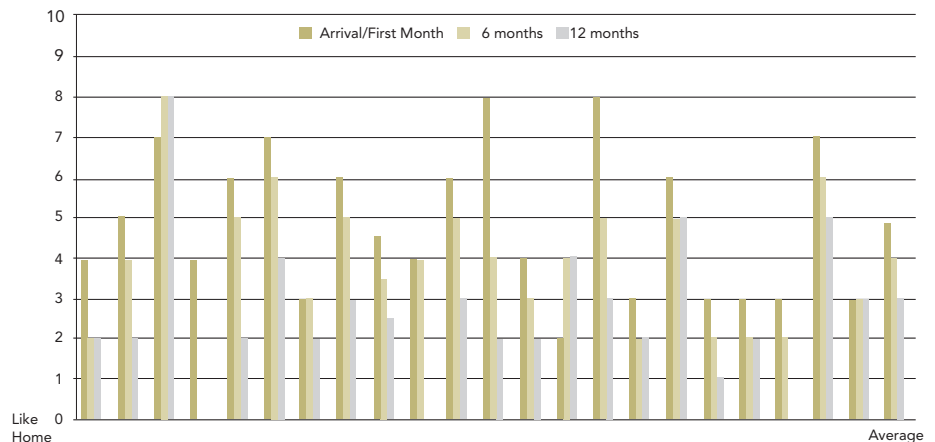
industry will have more Northern Europeans and Americans than I meet in the actuarial circles.

- Eight of the sample are turning into serial ex-pats—that means that they have lived in other places before their current assignment. This is quite common and I am turning into one as well. It is a great lifestyle.
- There can be delays of several months up to several years for families moving as spouses try to leave jobs, waiting for the end of school year, etc.

HAVE I LANDED ON MARS?

No matter how many vacations you have taken to an ex-pat country, arriving there can make you feel like you have landed on Mars. I asked, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 feeling like you have not left home and 10 feeling like you landed on Mars, how long did it take to feel comfortable? Again, different results will be given for different assignments. Moving from New York to Beijing is different than moving from London to New York.

How Foreign Does it Feel?



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The graph on page 10 shows for the people surveyed, how foreign the new place felt. The average is under “5” at arrival, and decreases thereafter to around “3” after a year. As some people have not been here for a year, not all data points are filled in. Generally speaking the feeling of “foreignness” decreases over time.

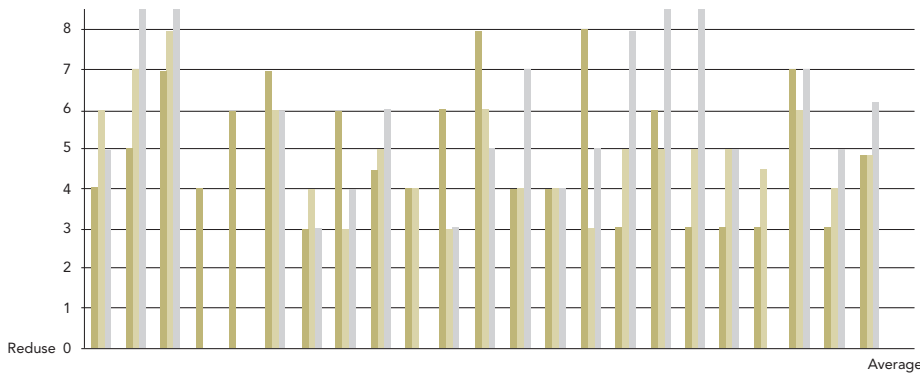
BUT WILL I HAVE ANY FRIENDS?

The answer is yes. But you need to put in the effort. In the survey, I asked people about their social life.

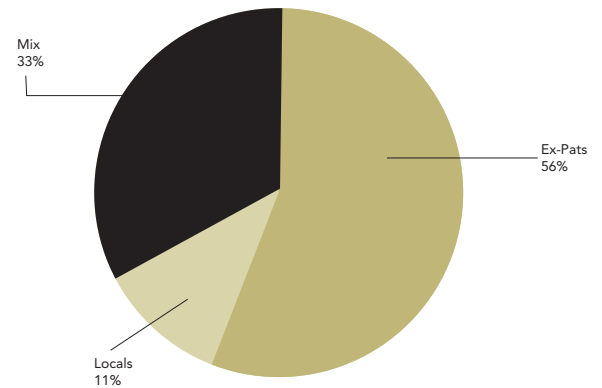
People seem to have a pretty active social life. I think if you were active at home, you will have an active social life wherever you live.

When asked who your friends are, the following response was given. I do not find the responses that surprising. Locals already have a network of friends and family, whereas the ex-pat is actively seeking out new friends. The ex-pat life is also very transient, but some people feel that these relationships will remain in place, even if relocation occurs.

How is the Social Life?



Who Are Your Friends?



ANY ADVICE?

I asked my friends for advice on ‘integrating in’ for new people considering or moving abroad. Here is a sampling:

- Many conveniences in your home country may not be there in the ex-pat country. Instead of whining and complaining, try looking at it from the viewpoint of the people there—usually there is a reason for not having those conveniences

that we take for granted at home. Be sensitive about topics like politics, religion, race, etc.—this helps to be more empathetic and will go further when making friends.

- Some countries are easier to fit in than others. Obviously, the United States has many foreigners and it is almost difficult to know who the locals are and who moved there. In “ex-pat country,” the foreign community is usually very small and you have to accept that you will always be seen as a foreigner even in the situation where you have lived there for 15 years and can speak the language perfectly. And obviously, traveling as a tourist and living somewhere is completely different.
- It may not get easier the more you move; there is a perception that once you have become an expat the move to the next place will be easy. You have to start again with new circles of friends, and kids can misbehave as they also have to start again and do not understand why they have

moved. It can also emphasize that you have no fixed roots—a feeling of where next? On the flip side, it is very exciting, a great experience for kids and an opportunity to travel, not to mention generally great for your CV/resume.

- The more and sooner that you integrate locally, the better the assignment will be.
- Have an open mind—there are many ways to do the same thing. Stay curious, learn, and listen. No matter where you are there are always positive and negative things—focus on the positive ones. Try the food in places the locals go, go shopping where the locals go and do not be only a patron of the glitzy malls. Explore!

Embrace the opportunities, they are wondrous, even the difficult experiences add to your wealth of experiences! It is a great time in your life that will change you forever. □



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