

THE CHALLENGES OF DUAL CAREER HOUSEHOLDS IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY

By Leila Heron

Executive Briefing: The global economy, growing numbers of dual income households, and the increase of international assignments are producing pressure on American multinationals and the Federal Government to provide career transition assistance to spouses/partners worldwide. New support programs emphasizing entrepreneurial skills training and internet savvy show promise to boost employment opportunities abroad.



The importance of addressing dual career mobility is integral to the successful international operations of leading American corporations and a variety of Federal Government agencies with staff at U.S. embassies worldwide. Corporate surveys from GMAC and other reputable research sources have indicated that a decision to accept an international assignment frequently hinges on meeting the professional needs of a spouse/partner in a foreign country. At the same time, GMAC's survey (2006) has indicated only 36% of companies assist spouses/partners with securing work permits, 30% with education assistance, and 17% with the job search process abroad. Of companies surveyed, 22% provide no assistance whatsoever. In addition, this same survey has indicated 59% of spouses/partners were employed prior to a foreign assignment, but only 8% were employed while accompanying a family member abroad.

To manage international staffing requirements, employee dual career concerns, and to reduce costs, some companies have moved to sending young single executives on short-term assignments abroad. At the same time GMAC's 2006 survey reported 82% of spouses/partners accompanied an international transfer, and 54% of transfers included children. The U.S. Dept. of State, on the other hand, views career assistance to Federal Civilian family members as essential and provides a variety of formal programs and job counseling services in Washington, D.C., and at U.S. Embassies worldwide.

The Challenges

American multinationals and the U.S. Federal Government have traditionally faced a number of stumbling blocks in addressing international dual career employment. Local laws have frequently made it very difficult for accompanying spouses/partners in the corporate sector to obtain temporary work permits abroad. Federal Civilian family members, however, have benefited from bilateral and/or de facto work agreements in a number of foreign countries. At the same time,

employment in sectors subject to local licensing requirements including the engineering, legal, and medical professions has generally been off-limits to foreign spouses/partners regardless of corporate or U.S. government affiliation. Beyond work permits, spouses/partners have generally confronted significant barriers to securing local employment in the form of competition with foreign nationals, insufficient language skills, and a lack of familiarity with the prevailing business culture and norms.

The Track Record: Career Support to Spouses/Partners

To date, commitment and interest by American multinationals regarding spouse/partner professional dislocation has generally been low. At the same time, some forty leading multinationals, including American companies, have organized an advocacy campaign through the "Permits Foundation" to encourage foreign governments to liberalize work permit laws in favor of accompanying spouses/partners in the private and public sector. To date, seventeen countries have changed their laws allowing temporary employment by multinational spouses/partners in the local economy, and advocacy efforts are ongoing. By contrast, the U.S. Dept. of State has developed and implemented a wide range of strategies to facilitate spouse/partner career transition abroad including the provision of on-site job counseling services by employment advisors posted at U.S. Embassies abroad, entrepreneurial training, and job matching assistance, among other services. Importantly, the Dept. of State recognizes that employee retention depends upon a sustained commitment to spouses/partners with respect to international employment and professional development. As illustrated in the Appendix ("Spouse/Partner Workforce Demographics Abroad"), Dept. of State programs serve a considerably smaller constituency as compared to the estimated number of spouses/partners in the multinational sector including American companies.

New Frontiers: International Dual Careers

To date, no definitive solutions have been developed to meet the needs of the growing population of international dual career households. At the same time, this issue is gaining visibility in the media and with public policy decision-makers worldwide, and more American companies are beginning to take notice.

In the area of employment counseling and professional development, U.S. Dept. of State and selected corporate support programs have evolved considerably, and new approaches to tackling foreign work environments now emphasize creativity and entrepreneurial skills. In particular, new programs highlight the strategic use of web technologies to support business start-up, training, and consulting activities compatible with a lifestyle characterized by frequent moves around the world.

Overall, rapid advances in internet/web technologies are transforming the landscape of conventional employment opportunities abroad for the benefit of displaced professionals in a wide variety of fields. Going forward, the challenge for corporate sector and Federal Government career support programs will be to assist spouses/partners to leverage web technologies in the

international environment and, at the same time, make full use of skills, talents, and resources on a local basis in a foreign country. ♦ **gBR Article 02-04, Copyright © 2008.**

Sources

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Appendix Spouse/Partner Workforce Demographics Abroad

	Spouse/Partner Population Abroad	Employed by American Embassy Abroad	Local Employment Abroad (Includes Self-Employment)	Spouse/Partner Not Working Abroad
U.S. Department of State, February 2006	8,757	2,273	986	5,498
U.S. Department of State, October 2007	9,243	2,335	1,133	5,775
U.S. Multinational Spouses/Partners	N/A – estimated 4 million plus U.S. citizens	Generally ineligible	N/A	N/A
GMAC 2006 Survey (MNCs Worldwide)	N/A	N/A	Est. 8% of total # accompanying spouses	High %
Permits Foundation (MNCs Worldwide)	65,000 (est.) staff international assignments	N/A	N/A	N/A