Tips for a Successful Relocation

By Nicole Outhwaite

The Employee Relocation Council (ERC) ranks moving as third in life’s most stressful events behind the death of a loved one and divorce. Employees being transferred by their company will find themselves feeling vulnerable and in need of support. Support for the expat is vital for any company, and utilising all of the tools available, from intercultural training to orientation programs, can make the difference between a successful relocation and an unhappy worker.

“There’s nothing more expensive (for a company) than a failed expatriate relocation,” explains Marco Dilenge, marketing manager - Continental Europe for Crown Relocations. “If the expat’s family is not happy and they want to go back home, the company is left having to find another employee to fill that position.” “Today, there is a vital importance for corporations to have a relocated employee who is productive from the first day and is comfortable in his new environment.”

Of course, the individual needs, wants and desires of both the expatriate and their spouse and family makes it difficult to have a ‘one size fits all’ approach. But in order to make an expat relocation successful, there are several steps that a business, the relocation company and the employee themselves need to take.

The first of these steps is a pre-visit by the employee to his or her new home for an initial feeling out process where the relocation company can begin a settling-in program. Using Kuala Lumpur as an example, a generic overview about the vibrant, cosmopolitan nature of the city and its four million residents would be a nice introduction for a newcomer.

Social and cultural aspects of the city are also helpful in this process, including housing, shopping and landmarks within the area. For Kuala Lumpur, this would include general prices and locations of homes, what food markets are in the city, which medical facilities are recommended, schooling options and social activities for singles and families.

Other basic, but important information provided at this initial visit can help make a future resident feel more at ease. With finances varying from country to country, learning the unit of currency, like the Ringgit in Malaysia, can help the expat adjust immediately. Also, a cost of living index with comparison process for groceries, transportation, accommodations, family life, entertainment and health helps provide the relocating family with a frame of reference for costs ranging from eggs and milk to car purchases and taxi fees to a movie ticket and a round of golf.

“Providing these services has proven to be a key to customer satisfaction in the relocation industry”, according to Crown Relocations’ Global Mobility experts. “Things like helping the clients find a home help in a school search for their children and giving a detailed description for the area where the family eventually settles in are all important parts of the orientation process.”
There are a number of key factors a company should consider before recruiting expatriates to ensure the success of the employment:

**Work Permit**
Immigration Policies undergo continuous changes. Start the visa and immigration procedure early – before the new employee arrives, and utilize professional help to ensure a smooth processing of documents.

**House Rental**
Housing is one of the largest cost factors in expatriate employment. Budget housing and schooling allowances are adjusted according to market rates.

**Cross-Cultural Training**
Provide all expatriate employees and their spouses/partners and children with the critical information necessary to thrive, not just survive, in their new location. The skills needed to complete these tasks successfully are not innate. Cross-cultural training can provide the missing competencies and knowledge to fill the gap. One of the attractions of working overseas is being continually challenged by different experiences. Some of these will be good and some will be less than memorable. However, by preparing for all of the new occurrences that will undoubtedly unfold, an expat can lessen the surprise and minimise the unavoidable cultural shock.

Carla Foden, business development manager for Crown Relocations gives the following tips:

“There are many aspects to a relocations success which corporates need to consider, however if the main following points are addressed as early on as possible, the likelihood of a positive outcome will be significantly increased:

- Support the whole family and ensure their expectations are realistic
- Prepare the family for a likely culture shock
- Provide the family with a ‘buddy’ - whether through an outsourced partner or internal resource (or both!)
- Always communicate with the family

Remember - each family is different and have the flexibility in your policy to allow for this.

The key word is support!

Relocating employees is no easy task. While most companies move just 25 employees per year for expatriate assignments, the related responsibilities of the HR professional can be overwhelming. Often the HR professional is responsible for relocation in addition to several other key human resource management functions. To ensure that the relocation program is in alignment with the organization’s business objectives, company culture and budget requirements, adherence to some basic principles can be helpful.

Other tips for a successful relocation:

**Choosing the right employee**
In order to ensure that the appropriate employees are chosen for expatriate assignments, a company should have a formal candidate selection process in place. Service providers such as Crown Relocations offer Candidate Assessment Programs that help the employee and spouse to explore all aspects of life on assignment – from daily living and career development to repatriation. Emphasis is placed on evaluating the employee’s adaptability to the new environment, introducing coping skills and change-management techniques and providing an overview of behavioral, social and cultural nuances in the destination location. And, given the significant investment an assignment represents, identifying potential opportunities that are expected to arise upon return is critical to retention and protection of the company’s investment.

Sarah DeHayes, Director of Consulting Services at Crown, also believes that what makes a difference is for transferees to be briefed on what to expect so that they’re prepared and organised. She says that for some companies, they are swayed by the technical skills rather than the ‘softer skills’ – and although companies do test for cultural sensitivity, all too often they will play the results down and go ahead in selecting employees based on their performance at home.

**Include the family**
Quite often assignments fail because an employee’s partner or children do not acclimatize to their new country and surroundings. In 2008, the Permits Foundation interviewed more than 3,000 expat spouses and partners. 89% of spouses were working prior to the assignment and just 35% during the assignment itself. Around three-quarters of those not working said they would like to work, which invariably leads to frustration and discord. Eight in ten working spouses said they adapted well to their new country, but for those not working, just 32% reported a positive adjustment to their new surroundings. The majority of expat partners said they would have welcomed support or advice on their new job search, but only 11% felt they received adequate support.

**Expect the unexpected**
While some issues that arise during relocation are unavoidable, it is essential that the expatriate has a single point of contact or ‘go to’ professional with experience to interpret policy, coordinate services, and to provide guidance throughout the process.

**Measure success**
Continuous improvement can only occur in an environment where results are measured. Employee surveys, service provider evaluations and internal feedback mechanisms should be established to assist HR in refining program design delivery and process.

When all is said and done, these tips should provide an easier transition for the HR Manager, a more cost-effective way to relocate staff for a company, and most importantly, a successful employee.