



Re:locate



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PROFILE LOCATIONS

Introduction

Relocation involves moving families, including working spouses and partners and perhaps older children.

Finding a job or continuing a career in a new location – either domestically or internationally – presents a major source of stress, particularly if the couple are dependent upon two incomes and if the working partner wishes to continue to follow a satisfying career.

This factsheet examines the role of career counselling within domestic and international relocation, explaining why it is necessary, how its benefits can be communicated, the content and process underpinning career counselling, and how to go about outsourcing this aspect of relocation policy.

Factsheets:

Career Counselling for Partners

The role of career counselling

Economic necessity, family mobility or responsibilities and organisational changes affect us all at some point in our careers. Career counselling aims to help people to identify their future career trajectory and is critical when relocation – either domestically or internationally – brings unexpected change to a person's working life.

Each career is as individual as the person who has it. Some people have careers involving clearly connected roles and employment periods for many years; what can be called 'linear' careers. Many others, especially in recent times as the workplace demands more and more flexibility, find themselves less able to see a continuous 'straight-line' connection between various periods of paid and unpaid employment. Relocation – either domestically or internationally – can serve to promote and enhance career choices or cause/result in career discontinuity, career breaks or career change.

What is career counselling?

Career counselling can take a variety of forms, from provision of information that is related to clear work options to the identification of personal work goals. It can seek to answer a wide range of career-related questions, from 'How do I become a veterinary surgeon?' to 'What can I do now?' It often includes questionnaires, skills identification, aptitude tests and one-to-one discussion.

Whatever the format, career counselling should offer a safe and inspiring forum to investigate and explore future work possibilities, whatever the circumstances.

Why is career counselling needed?

The uncertainty of facing a series of new challenges within a short period of time, such as may be the case on relocation, can seem overwhelming and provoke a great deal of anxiety. This is not least because it's increasingly the norm for both partners to work both for personal satisfaction and financial reasons. In the light of the real concerns, it is clear that support, information, guidance and local knowledge are all invaluable at a time of change and potential stress to a relocating family or couple. The offer of a career counselling service that's tailored to individual needs regarding relocation from any part of the country or world can change a situation from a seemingly daunting one to one that's perceived as being full of opportunity and potential.



: Policy issues

Policy Implications

As with other relocation allowances and benefits, the provision of career counselling should be documented within formal relocation policies. This ensures that relocating employees are able to tell their families about the support that is available and understand any eligibility requirements and financial limits placed upon it. The provision of career counselling assistance within policy is good practice in terms of demonstrating the organisation's understanding of employee concerns and achieving buy-in to mobility.

Career counselling may be made available to employees themselves, thereby enabling them to explore the potential benefits of the impending relocation, as well as – or solely to – accompanying spouses/partners. Career counselling may also be extended to include children still living with the family, who are of working age and who are affected by the move and its implications for their own careers.

Confidentiality is a key concern and, given this factor, the policy should explain the confidential nature of any counselling offered and taken up by the employee and/or family members. Counselling may, for example, be included within the range of services provided within an employee

assistance programme (EAP), or be provided by specialists through relocation companies and other relocation service providers.

Cost Implications

Career counselling is not an expensive item in policy and its benefits far outweigh expenditure. Employers offering counselling services are likely to obtain greater employee commitment to mobility, particularly as dual career/income issues become of ever greater concern. Valued employees, particularly at senior levels, are likely to have spouses and partners who are career holders themselves and are unlikely to be willing to simply give up their future prospects to trail in their partner's wake. Understanding the labour market in the new location, their own strengths and weaknesses and how these can be best matched to potential opportunities – be they in the same country or across the globe – is critical to their willingness to support the move and their partner's likely acceptance of it. For lower-graded employees, the issue may revolve around loss of income. Most couples are dependent on two incomes and the cost to the employee of a period of unemployment within the family may act as the brake on relocation. The cost of career counselling can

therefore be thought of as minimal compared with the implications of relocation refusal when talent is needed in the new area. Expediency in managing this is therefore critical.

Communicating the policy to affected individuals

Employers deal directly with employees as a rule. But career counselling is likely to be most valued by those who are not in direct contact with the organisation – namely family members. Employees cannot always be relied upon to communicate the message that benefits are included within policy. Family members may not find clauses within relocation policy documents particularly reader-friendly, even if the employee does take a copy home. The issue here concerns how to communicate with others outside of the workforce.

Suggestions for getting the message across that career help is available include newsletters and information packs mailed to the employee's home, with web link information included so that other family members can access details as appropriate. Some organisations invite spouses and partners into the office to discuss directly with them, face to face, their concerns and to inform them about relocation benefits targeted specifically towards them.

GROUP MOVES: A SPECIAL CASE

When group moves take place, the influx of personnel into the new area can result in distortions in the labour market and, as a result, career opportunities for the spouses and partners of those being relocated. The demand for labour in the new location may be limited, particularly if organisations are moving personnel into development areas. In such instances, it may be appropriate for career counselling services to be offered to relocating partners, and perhaps to older children of working age, if employee commitment to the move is to be sustained. This career counselling becomes particularly important in identifying alternative sources of employment and how perhaps-hidden talents can be exploited to gain access to new career horizons when competition for scarce jobs is an issue.

Career management for spouses

Although career management planning may be provided for employees, it is not common to see career management provided for spouses/partners within policy. Nevertheless research carried out within the international arena did indicate that relocating couples would value this. Perhaps this is an area for policy development in the future.

Employment in a new location: why is this a problem?

For any of us, having to deal with upheaval and personal change in our lives offers both challenge and opportunity. Relocation, as is proven by the latest research, can often be perceived as problematic. It is therefore not welcomed for a number of reasons, especially those related to the effect it might have on dual career partnerships and families.

A change of location, whether it occurs only once or more often, can interrupt a partner's career and affect confidence levels significantly. The individual affected is immediately faced with a number of issues to consider, which can form the basis of content within career counselling:

- Will I be able to work at all in this new location (depending on factors such as work permits, visas, language skills, recognition of qualifications, etc)?
- How will this move affect my career as a whole?
- Is there any demand for my particular work skills and experience here?
- How do I go about getting work-related information and employment in this area?
- What will employers' attitudes be towards me?
- How can I tap into local networks, recruitment avenues, or information supplies?
- How long will all this take and how soon should I begin to look for employment?
- What about my out of date CV and rusty interview skills?
- Can I handle all this AND be supportive to my partner or family while dealing with the stresses of a new environment?

The career counselling process

Effective career development counselling will always be tailored to the individual – one size does not fit all – so it is best practice to offer a flexible service within a clear framework, following an initial assessment of what the client requires. Differing needs can then be addressed during one or over a series of sessions to fit in with relocation demands and timeframe. Services may include telephone, online and information support lines. It is also possible to run successful group career development workshops, if numbers allow.

Whatever the circumstances, a good service will include the opportunity for the relocating partner to

- review – current position, past achievements and learning points;
- reassess – next steps, short term goals and longer term direction; and
- revitalise – personal confidence and a clear sense of focus to career plans.

Practical help with skills assessment, identifying current work needs, valuing past achievements and learning and the focus on realistic goals and how to achieve them are critical. Accompanying this, it is very helpful for those experiencing periods of uncertainty or change to be given a clear overview of career transition and how it works. Rather than assuming it is necessary to leap from one work setting to another, it is possible to view career transition as a path leading from present circumstances towards future goals in a working life. This path has clearly identifiable stages; and it is often reassuring for individuals to see where they are placed along this path at any given time.

Transferable skills

Individuals often need help with identifying particular transferable

skills, or valuing past roles in different cultures and work contexts, especially if they have been out of paid employment for any length of time. Discussion and self-reflective exercises are ways of recognising and describing work preferences, underlying skills and competencies in both paid and unpaid activities. The concept of transferable skills is especially useful to those who may need or wish to change career context or direction at the time of relocation. This can result in the individual being able to widen their own horizons and allow their own potential to inspire them. Relocation is an ideal opportunity for this to take place in a new environment and it often gives people the chance to do things they have always dreamed of doing.

Career development strategies

The idea of self promotion is often disliked, and can seem particularly daunting in unfamiliar territory, so the key is to shift emphasis from 'self-marketing' by focusing on career-development planning. In this way, relevant networking and research techniques seem less strange and become important steps in the career transition path. This path includes identifying learning or training opportunities and taking up voluntary and community work, as well as informational interviewing, individual support with job search, applications, CVs and interview preparation.

Career counselling should offer relevant information to back up personal plans. Local employment opportunities, learning resources, and general information about 'how things work around here' are equally necessary in later stages of career transition. Support can be in the form of telephone and online direction to sources of specific information, including professional networks, educational establishments or local contacts.

: International Relocation

The Challenge of Intentional Mobility

Relocating abroad presents particular challenges to working spouses and partners who wish to continue their careers while their partner undertakes an assignment. Work permit and visa regulations need to be observed, and cultural and language differences must be overcome to gain a foothold in the employment market.

International employment restrictions

In order to work in a foreign country, it is often a requirement that a work-permit or working visa be held by the applicant. There are exceptions to this – for example, European Union nationals have freedom to live and work across the EU. Spouses of work permit holders wishing to seek employment in the UK are also able to work without the requirement for a work permit in their own right.

The position regarding different countries' requirements is changing and a relaxation of the strict regimes applied by some countries is taking place. For example, the USA has recently made changes to its visa laws in this regard. Accompanying partners need to be aware that their status may not be recognised – in some countries marriage offers the only chance to accompany the employee long-term (ie, other than as a tourist) and to obtain work authorisation.

It is important to remain abreast of recent developments in this regard. An excellent source of information is the Permits Foundation¹ website.

Qualifications

A further aspect to consider is the acceptance of qualifications in a different country. Although there is increasing progress towards international recognition of qualifications, it may well be the case

that one country's qualifications are not recognised by another, or that updating is required. Individuals should investigate where qualifications can be updated. The costs of such endeavours is increasingly featuring in organisations' international relocation policies as part of dual career assistance. Those planning to pursue a career abroad should seek advice from HR on this aspect.

Personal development

In order that spouses/partners present themselves appropriately in the foreign job market, it is important to ensure attention is paid to personal development. Clearly, it is an advantage to speak the local language when applying for work abroad. Although language training available through the relocation policy may not ensure fluency or the ability to compete on an equal level with locals, it does provide a head start, and individuals should be encouraged to undertake personal endeavours to supplement any training offered.

Personal development also involves identifying competencies that otherwise may not seem obvious. Identifying skills, knowledge and values in various aspects of an individual's life can aid this process tremendously.

Career development

It is rare for organisations to conduct career development planning for accompanying spouses and partners.

However, some enlightened employers do offer career break schemes whereby a role in the organisation is held open for them until their return and – in some instances – periods of service pre- and post-assignment are linked for continuity of benefits purposes.

Non-paid work

If paid work is not possible – because of visa issues or perhaps other barriers such as lack of employment/career opportunities – accompanying partners may consider voluntary opportunities as a way of enhancing their skills and building a portfolio of competencies for the future.

Networking and internet help

Some employers have set up networking groups to share job opportunities in their organisations for accompanying spouses. The internet organisation partnerjob.com² is a helpful source. Others have set up or facilitated spouse networking groups. In some countries there is a strong spousal support network with the potential for employment opportunities. For those in London, Focus Information Services³ is a useful source of information, for example.

Repatriation

Working abroad can help to develop international competencies and talent that will be much in demand on repatriation. It is important that accompanying spouses and partners document their learning and experience for use on return in this regard. However, repatriation is acknowledged as difficult. A positive attitude to returning to a chosen career path will be required, as employers at home may worry that the employee will seek further work abroad in the future.

Cultural implications of pursuing a career abroad

Recruitment and selection practices vary across cultures, with different emphasis being placed in recruitment advertising and selection tools. The competencies sought in potential candidates reflect cultural norms of the host country. Some cultures reflect the notion of high 'power distance', meaning that hierarchical structures are the norm and management styles tend towards being more autocratic. Countries as wide ranging as France and Mexico fall into this category. Others such as the UK and Sweden adopt a more participative style of management and organisational structures tend to be flatter. Flexibility in approach to dealing with subordinates and in understanding one's place in a hierarchy is therefore crucial.

Nuances of language are important too. Traits such as 'hard working' have different implications in different countries. In France, to work hard has implications of 'toil' rather than the dedication to duty it signifies in the UK or the willingness to go the 'extra mile' in the USA. This raises issues of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' in cultures. Masculine societies (eg, the USA) value independence, competitiveness and achievement. Feminine societies (eg, Sweden) value interdependence and quality of life. This means that in countries, such as the USA, employees are expected to be ambitious and to work long hours, carry out overtime and shift working as required, and take short holidays. In Sweden working hours are shorter, holidays significantly longer and working weekends and overtime would not be considered the norm.

Other dimensions of culture concern tolerance of ambiguity. Some societies feel threatened by uncertainty – Japan, France and Germany are examples. Others are more tolerant of ambiguity (eg, the UK and Sweden). In practice, this translates into a greater structuring of activities with more rules to follow and a greater use of specialists in countries that are highly uncertainty-

avoidant, compared to greater flexibility, fewer rules and a greater use of generalists in countries that are tolerant of ambiguity.

A further cultural dimension concerns the degree to which societies value individualism compared with a collectivist approach. The former value loose ties between individuals and the trait of looking after oneself, the latter value extended groups and group loyalty. This particularly influences team working and how teams are managed.

Preparing a CV and covering letter

To reach the interview stage, potential candidates need to comply with cultural conventions in the content and format of their CVs and covering letters. The first step is to consider carefully the wording of job advertisements and try to understand the cultural drivers describing the job and the person specifications. It is important to stress appropriate competencies and give relevant examples as far as possible. The format of the CV will also vary. In the USA it is usual to supply detailed information with CVs stressing individual achievements such as examples of public speaking or publications. To supply the brief (and rather modest) style of CV used in the UK implies that the person has not demonstrated ambition and is therefore likely to be discarded. Americans applying for jobs in the UK need to rethink their approach as a US-style CV can appear to demonstrate exaggerated self-importance, certainly not welcomed in the UK. Attention also needs to be paid to the covering letter. In the UK this is normally brief and typed. In France, where graphology is used widely, it should be hand-written and provide considerably more detail. This represents the French culture's assumptions concerning the need to reduce uncertainty, compared with the British preference for tolerance of ambiguity.

Interviews in different cultures

Interviewing techniques and approaches also reflect cultural norms. In so-called low context

cultures, specific and direct communication is the norm. Therefore interviews in the UK and USA, for example, place emphasis on answering questions directly and quickly with relevant examples. In Eastern cultures, where high context communication is the norm, direct answers may be considered impolite and an indirect approach is usual. Relationship building is also critical in Eastern cultures, representing the collectivist cultural assumption. In Korea, when asked a particularly challenging question, it is polite to allow a period of silence before answering to show respect for the quality of the question. In the West, a period of silence indicates lack of knowledge or incomprehension.

Selection and assessment

Selection and assessment tools frequently used in some countries may be unheard of or may be treated with disdain in others. Psychometric testing for example, although common practice in the USA and UK, is uncommon in many other countries. Tests may, potentially, be culturally biased, and candidates can therefore be disadvantaged by them, even if they are familiar with the process. In achievement-oriented cultures, taking such tests may be considered challenging. In cultures where status is ascribed through rank or age, such tests are viewed as demeaning.

Induction and socialisation

Once the cultural hurdles of gaining employment in a foreign culture have been mastered, the attention should be turned to induction and socialisation. Again, these practices may be well developed or non-existent. Performance appraisal may prove very different, too. In low context cultures, direct feedback is the norm – but this is less likely in high context societies. In high power distance countries, feedback will be top down; in less hierarchical societies, it will be more wide ranging and encompass subordinates, suppliers, etc. Reward and motivation systems will also vary across cultures, reflecting, for example, individual or group based rewards.

: Selecting Career Counsellors

Outsourcing Career Counselling

Employers may offer career counselling in-house, for example via the human resources function or outsource this to a specialist provider. There are numerous organisations that offer counselling services including relocation management service companies, perhaps as part of a 'one-stop shop' whereby they subcontract to a specialist career counsellor. Alternatively, employers might consider working directly with a specialist counsellor. Employee assistance programmes (EAPs) may offer counselling to employees and their family members on a range of confidential issues – and this service might be extended to cover career development.

Relocation might provoke domestic crises, and employers might therefore also wish to consider provision of crisis counselling via specialists in this field.

In selecting a counsellor, it is important to remember that their specialist area of expertise should be taken into consideration. Career

counselling may be general in nature as well as including information specific to a destination's culture and labour market. Counsellors offering a 'crisis' service have undergone specialist training, eg, in understanding and mediating relationships.

Counselling is, by its nature, about helping people to help themselves – it's not about offering answers 'on a plate'. It is their ability to work with employees and their spouses/partners to enable them to find their own solution through empathy, expert guidance and communications skills that makes the career counselling service provider 'special'. It is important, therefore, to select a trained counsellor to work with staff and their families, ensuring that they are confident, but not overbearing, communicators, have wide knowledge of potential career paths and transitions, as well as labour markets and, if necessary, different cultures along with cognisance of confidentiality issues.

Career counselling can help to identify new opportunities as well as more traditional linear career paths.

Once these have been identified, part of the next steps in the process will involve researching the job markets locally. Employers may be able to help here by making good use of the recruitment agencies that they have everyday dealings with, as part of their own employee resourcing process. They may also have contacts with professional bodies, which also may act as useful sources of further information. ●●●

Footnotes

- 1 Permits Foundation
www.permitsfoundation.com
- 2 Visit www.partnerjob.com
- 3 Focus Information Services
www.focus-info.org

Recommended further reading

Careers In. . . and Working In. . . series: www.careers-portal.co.uk
Occupations: www.connexions.gov.uk
Portfolio Working: Joanna Grigg, Kogan Page
What Colour is Your Parachute?: Richard Bolles, Ten Speed Press

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Profile Locations' Career Counselling service is designed to help partners explore the options and opportunities that a relocation move has to offer, enabling them to make decisions about their future careers and move with confidence to the new area. We offer career counselling on an individual basis with our team of professional career counsellors and also run workshops for small groups to support group moves and expatriate projects.

To find out more, telephone 01892 891334, or email fiona@profilelocations.co.uk
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Re:locate Factsheets

Re:locate magazine publishes a series of Factsheets on key aspects of relocation designed to promote best practice and to provide practical advice and guidance for relocation and HR professionals. The comprehensive range of topics to be covered includes relocation policy, property, international moves, employee support and related areas.

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